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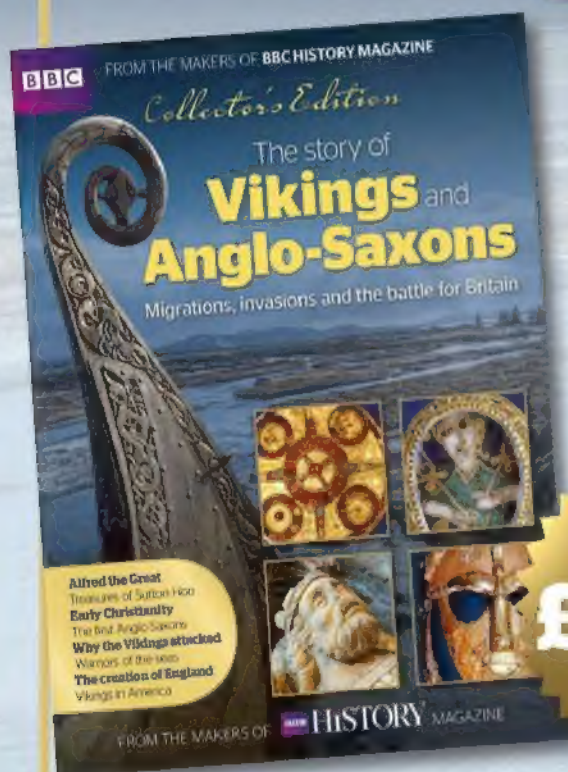
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# The **Second** **World War** Story

# Welcome



MORE THAN 75 YEARS have now passed since the Second World War broke out in September 1939. And yet the conflict is still a key episode in Britain's national story. *BBC History Magazine* has covered many facets of the war in its pages over the years, and for *The Second World War Story* we pulled together a collection of some of the most trenchant features. In addition

some features were **commissioned specifically**, including the piece by Terry Charman, tracing the story of the war in pictures.

Read on to discover the history behind some of the most important events in the conflict, including the Nazi-Soviet clash, the Battle of Britain, the attack on Hiroshima and the Holocaust. Plus you will also get to read personal accounts from some of the remarkable individuals who were caught up in the conflict.

We'll continue to explore the story of the war

within the pages of *BBC History Magazine* itself, so if you like this special edition, do keep an eye out for the **magazine**, which is published every four weeks. You can also take advantage of a great subscription offer on page 56 and, if you are a subscriber, you'll get free postage when ordering special editions in future.

I hope you enjoy *The Second World War Story*, and that it might be a springboard for further reading, studying and exploring of six of the most important years in modern times.

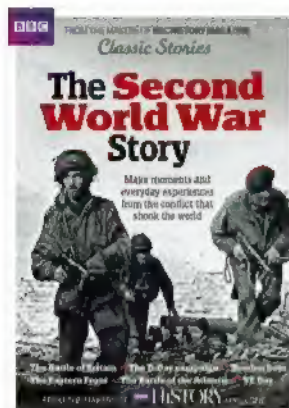
**Rob Attar**  
Editor

*Please note that this special edition is a reprint of one of our bestselling titles, which was first published in 2009. We've made small updates to correct things such as website links, but otherwise the text is largely unchanged from the original.*



Winston Churchill addresses sailors on Horse Guard's Parade, 19 April 1940

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IMAGE: CODY IMAGES

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## I was there

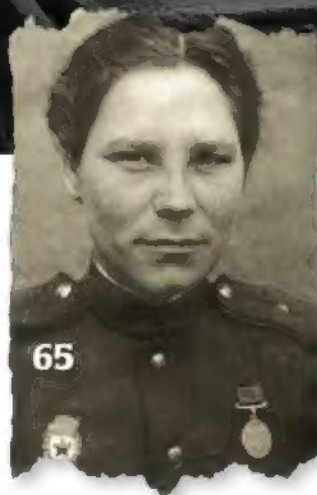
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# TIMELINE OF THE WAR

Lasting six years and one day, the Second World War started with Hitler's invasion of Poland and ended with the Japanese surrender. From Neville Chamberlain's reluctant declaration of war to the deployment of Fat Man and Little Boy, the timeline of a conflict that engulfed the world is traced by **Terry Charman**





## The German invasion of Poland

**1 September 1939:** German troops dismantle a Polish border post

The Second World War began at dawn on Friday 1 September 1939, when Hitler launched his invasion of Poland. The Poles fought bravely, but they were heavily outnumbered in both men and machines, and especially in the air. Britain and France declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939, but gave no real assistance to Poland. Two weeks later, Stalin invaded eastern Poland, and on 27 September Warsaw surrendered. Organised Polish resistance ceased after another week's fighting. Poland was divided up between Hitler and Stalin.

In Poland the Nazis unleashed a reign of terror that was eventually to claim six million victims, half of whom were Polish Jews murdered in extermination camps. The Soviet regime was no less harsh. In March and April 1940, Stalin ordered the murder of over 20,000 Polish officers and others who had been captured in September 1939. Tens of thousands of Poles were also forcibly deported to Siberia. By May 1945, and despite his promises to Churchill and Roosevelt, Stalin had installed a subservient communist regime in Poland. Back in 1939, Poland's then-leader Marshal Eduard Smigly-Rydz had warned, "With the Germans we risk losing our liberty, but with the Russians we lose our soul."

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## Dunkirk

**May 1940:** Men of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) wade out to a destroyer during the evacuation from Dunkirk

On 10 May 1940, Hitler began his long-awaited offensive in the west by invading neutral Holland and Belgium and attacking northern France. Holland capitulated after only five days of fighting, and the Belgians surrendered on 28 May. With the success of the German 'Blitzkrieg', the British Expeditionary Force and French troops were in danger of being cut off and destroyed. To save the BEF, an evacuation by sea was organised under the direction of Admiral Bertram Ramsay. Over nine days, warships of the Royal and French navies together with civilian craft, including the "little ships" made famous in a BBC broadcast

by JB Priestley, successfully evacuated over 338,000 British and Allied troops. Churchill called it a "miracle of deliverance", but warned, "Wars are not won by evacuations."

Nevertheless, the success of the evacuation strengthened not only Britain's defences in the face of a German invasion threat, but also Churchill's position against those like the foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, who favoured discussing peace terms. On 1 June 1940, the *New York Times* wrote, "So long as the English tongue survives, the word Dunkirk will be spoken with reverence." Seventy years later, Dunkirk is still synonymous with refusing to give up in times of crisis.



## The Battle of Britain

25 July 1940: RAF Spitfire pilots scramble for their planes

After France's surrender in June 1940, Churchill told the British people, "Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war". To mount a successful invasion, the Germans had to gain air superiority. The first phase of the battle began on 10 July with Luftwaffe attacks on shipping in the Channel. The following month, RAF Fighter Command airfields and aircraft factories came under attack. Under the dynamic direction of Lord Beaverbrook, production of Spitfire and

Hurricane fighters increased, and despite its losses in pilots and planes, the RAF was never as seriously weakened as the Germans supposed. The British also had the advantage that the battle was fought over home ground; pilots who survived their planes being shot down were soon back in action, while German aircrew went into 'the bag' as prisoners of war.

The battle continued until the end of October, but essentially it had been won in early September when the Germans

diverted their resources to night bombing. Radar, ground crews, aircraft factory workers all contributed to the victory, but it was of the young pilots from Britain, the Commonwealth and Nazi-occupied Europe of whom Churchill spoke when he said, "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few".

► **Fighter boys** page 16



## The Blitz

29 December 1940: St Paul's Cathedral photographed during the Second Great Fire of London

The Blitz – an abbreviation of the word Blitzkrieg (lightning war) – was the name given to the German air attacks on Britain between 7 September 1940 and 16 May 1941. London was bombed by accident on the night of 24 August 1940, and the following night Churchill ordered an attack on Berlin. This prompted the Germans to shift their main effort from attacking RAF airfields to bombing Britain's towns and cities. 7 September 1940, 'Black Saturday', saw the beginning of the first major attacks on London. The capital was bombed for 57 consecutive nights, when over 13,650 tons of high explosive and 12,586 incendiary canisters were dropped by the Luftwaffe.

Beginning with Coventry on 14 November 1940, the Germans also began bombing other cities and towns while still keeping up attacks on London. Over 43,000 civilians were killed in the Blitz and much material damage was done, but British morale remained unbroken and Britain's capacity to wage war was unimpaired. In Churchill's words, Hitler had tried and failed "To break our famous island race by a process of indiscriminate slaughter and destruction".

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## Operation Barbarossa: the German invasion of Russia

**June 1941:** A column of Red Army prisoners taken during the first days of the German invasion

Since the 1920s, Hitler had seen Russia, with its immense natural resources, as the principal target for conquest and expansion. It would provide, he believed, the necessary 'Lebensraum', or living space, for the German people. And by conquering Russia, Hitler would also destroy the "Jewish pestilential creed of Bolshevism". His non-aggression pact with Stalin in August 1939 he regarded as a mere temporary expedient.

Barely a month after the fall of France, and while the Battle of Britain was being fought, Hitler started planning for the Blitzkrieg campaign against Russia, which began on 22 June 1941. Despite repeated warnings, Stalin was taken by surprise, and for the first few months the Germans achieved spectacular victories, capturing huge swathes of land and hundreds of thousands of prisoners. But they failed to take Moscow or Leningrad before winter set in.

On 5/6 December, the Red Army launched a counter-offensive which removed the immediate threat to the Soviet capital. It also brought the German high command to the brink of a catastrophic military crisis. Hitler stepped in and took personal command. His intervention was decisive and he later boasted, "That we overcame this winter and are today in a position again to proceed victoriously... is solely attributable to the bravery of the soldiers at the front and my firm will to hold out..."

► Stalin's unlikely victory page 42



## Pearl Harbor

**7 December 1941:** The destroyer USS Shaw explodes in dry dock after being hit by Japanese aircraft

After Japan's occupation of French Indo-China in July 1941, US President Franklin D Roosevelt, followed by Britain and the Netherlands, ordered the freezing of Japanese assets. Many Japanese now believed that there was no alternative between economic ruin and going to war with the United States and the European colonial powers. In October 1941, a hardline government under General Hideki Tojo came to power, and preparations were made to deliver a devastating blow against the Americans.

On 7 December 1941, "a date which will live in infamy," Japanese carrier-borne aircraft attacked the US Pacific fleet at its base at Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands. Despite warnings, the Americans were caught completely by surprise. Eight battleships were put out of action, and seven other warships damaged or lost. Over 2,500 Americans were killed, while the Japanese lost only 29 planes. Crucially, the American carriers were at sea and so escaped, and the base itself was not put out of action. The following day Congress declared war on Japan, which had also attacked British and Dutch colonial possessions.

On 11 December, Hitler declared war on the United States, and the war was now truly a global conflict. The Japanese were initially victorious everywhere, but Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto warned: "We can run wild for six months or a year, but after that I have utterly no confidence".

► Hitler versus America page 22





## The fall of Singapore

15 February 1942: Lieutenant General Arthur Percival and staff on their way to the Singapore Ford factory to negotiate the island's surrender with General Yamashita

The Japanese began their invasion of Malaya on 8 December 1941, and very soon the British and empire defenders were in full retreat. Told previously that the Japanese were no match for European troops, morale among the defending forces slumped as General Tomoyuki Yamashita's forces moved swiftly southwards towards Singapore. The sinking of the British capital ships HMS *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* by Japanese aircraft also contributed to the decline in morale, and panic began to set in among the civil population and the fighting troops. British commander Lieutenant General Arthur Percival had hoped to make a stand at Johore, but was forced to withdraw to Singapore Island. The Japanese landed there on 8/9 February, and before long the defence collapsed. To avoid further bloodshed, and with his water supply gone, Percival surrendered on 15 February.

Churchill described the surrender as, "the worst disaster... in British military history". Over 130,000 British and empire troops surrendered to a much smaller Japanese force, which only suffered 9,824 battle casualties during the 70-day campaign. Singapore was not only a humiliating military defeat, but also a tremendous blow to the prestige of the 'white man' throughout Asia.



## Midway

4 June 1942: The American aircraft carrier USS *Yorktown* under Japanese attack during the battle of Midway

For six months after Pearl Harbor, just as Admiral Yamamoto predicted, Japanese forces carried all before them, capturing Hong Kong, Malaya, the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies. In May 1942, in an attempt to consolidate their grip on their new conquests, the Japanese sought to eliminate the United States as a strategic Pacific power. This would be done by luring

into a trap the US navy carriers that had escaped Pearl Harbor, while at the same time the Japanese would occupy the Midway atoll in preparation for further attacks. The loss of the carriers would, the Japanese hoped, force the Americans to the negotiating table. In the event, it was the Americans who inflicted a crushing defeat on the Japanese. Their codebreakers were able to determine the location and date of the Japanese attack. This enabled US admiral Chester Nimitz to organise a trap of his own.

During the ensuing battle the Japanese suffered the loss of four carriers, one heavy cruiser and 248 aircraft, while American losses totalled one carrier, one destroyer and 98 planes. By their victory at Midway, the turning point of the Pacific war, the Americans were able to seize the strategic initiative from the Japanese, who had suffered irreplaceable losses. Admiral Nimitz described the battle's success as "Essentially a victory of intelligence", while President Roosevelt called it "Our most important victory in 1942... there we stopped the Japanese offensive."

► Japan meets its nemesis page 90





## Alamein

**25 October 1942** German prisoners of war wait for transport after their capture at Alamein

The North African campaign began in September 1940, and for the next two years the fighting was marked by a succession of Allied and Axis advances and retreats. In the summer of 1942, the Axis forces under 'Desert Fox' field marshal, Erwin Rommel, looked poised to take Cairo and advance on the Suez Canal. The British Middle East commander General Claude Auchinleck took personal command of the defending Eighth Army and halted the retreat at the strong defensive line at El Alamein. But Churchill, dissatisfied with Auchinleck, replaced him in August with General Harold Alexander, while Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery took over command of the Eighth Army.

Montgomery immediately began to build up an enormous superiority in men and equipment, finally launching his offensive at Alamein on 23 October 1942. By the beginning of November, the Axis forces were in full retreat, although final victory in North Africa was not achieved until May 1943. Although Montgomery has been criticised for being too cautious in exploiting his success at Alamein, it made him a household name and he became Britain's most popular general of the war. Churchill hailed Alamein as a "Glorious and decisive victory... the bright gleam has caught the helmets of our soldiers, and warmed and cheered all our hearts".



BETTY MAGES



## Stalingrad

**February 1943** Red Army soldiers hoist the Soviet flag over a recaptured Stalingrad factory following the German surrender

The battle for Stalingrad began in late August 1942, and by 12 September, German troops of the Sixth and Fourth Panzer Armies had reached the city's suburbs. Bearing the name of Russia's leader, Stalingrad had a symbolic significance as well as a strategic one.

Throughout September and October, under General Vassili Chuikov, the city's defenders contested every yard of ground of the devastated city. The Red Army's stubborn defence allowed General Georgi Zhukov time to prepare a counterattack that was launched on 19 November 1942, and which soon trapped the Sixth Army commanded by General Friederich Paulus.

Hitler, wrongly assured by Göring that the Luftwaffe could supply Stalingrad by air, ordered Paulus to hold out. He also ordered Field Marshal Erich Manstein to break through and relieve the beleaguered Sixth Army. Manstein was unsuccessful, and on 31 January 1943 Paulus capitulated. Of the 91,000 German troops who went into captivity, less than 6,000 returned home after the war. Stalingrad was one of Germany's greatest defeats, and it effectively marked the end of Hitler's dreams of an empire in the east.

► Stalin's unlikely victory page 42 ➤





## D-Day, Operation Overlord

6 June 1944 British commandos of the First Special Service Brigade land on Sword Beach

Operation Overlord, the invasion and liberation of north-west Europe, began on D-Day, 6 June 1944. That day, under the overall command of US General Dwight Eisenhower, British, Canadian and American troops, supported by the Allied navies and air forces, came ashore on the coast of Normandy. By the end of the day, 158,000 men, including airborne troops, had landed. Initially, except on the American

Omaha beach, German resistance was unexpectedly light. But it soon stiffened and the Allied breakout from the beachhead area was painfully slow.

The fierceness of the fighting can be gauged by the fact that in Normandy British infantry battalions were suffering the same percentage casualty rates as they had on the Western Front in 1914–1918. Eventually the breakout was achieved, and

on 25 August, Paris was liberated. Brussels followed on 3 September. Hopes that the war might be won in 1944 were dashed by the Allied failure at Arnhem and the unexpected German offensive in the Ardennes in December. It was not until 4 May 1945 that the German forces in north-west Europe surrendered to Montgomery at his HQ on Lüneburg Heath.

► **Antony Beevor on D-Day** page 78



## Yalta: The Big Three

**February 1945: Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin sit for a group photograph during the Yalta conference**

Between June 1940 and June 1941, Britain stood alone against Hitler. But then, after the German invasion of Russia and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, she gained two powerful allies. For the next four years Churchill did his utmost to foster 'The Grand Alliance' against the Nazis. He even earned the grudging admiration of Nazi propaganda chief Dr Goebbels who said, "...I can feel only respect for this man, for whom no humiliation is too base and no trouble too great when the victory of the Allies is at stake". Churchill conferred with both Roosevelt and Stalin to hammer out strategy and to discuss postwar arrangements. The three men congregated for the first time at Tehran in November 1943. There, and again at their last meeting at Yalta, Churchill was conscious of the fact that Britain, exhausted by her war effort, was now very much the junior partner of the two emerging superpowers.

At Yalta, the postwar division of Germany was agreed upon as was the decision to bring war criminals to trial. The future constitution of the United Nations was discussed, and Stalin undertook to enter the war against Japan after Germany had been defeated. But the future of eastern Europe remained a stumbling block. With the Red Army in occupation, the Soviet dictator was disinclined to listen to the views of his two allies.



## Dresden

**13-14 February 1945 Dresden under incendiary bomb attack**

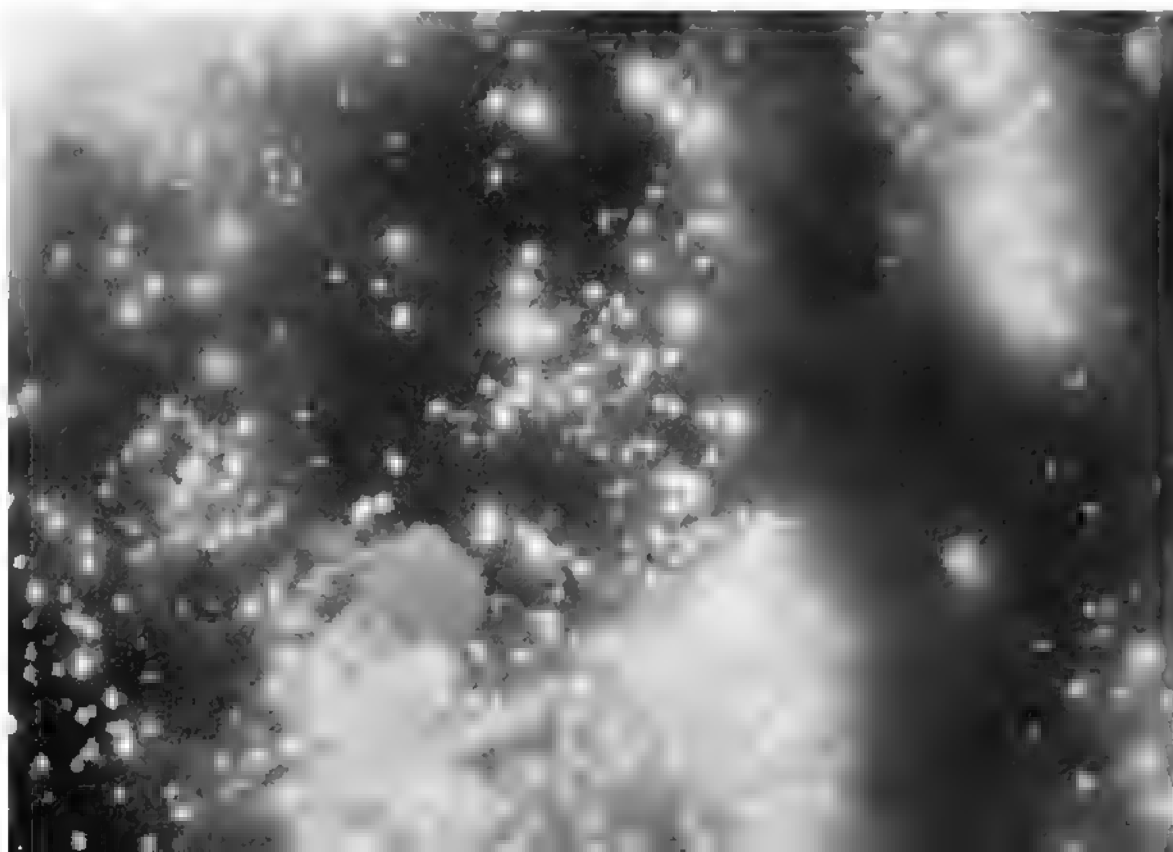
At Yalta, an Allied plan to bomb the hitherto untouched city of Dresden was discussed. The reason for attacking the city was due principally to its strategic importance as a communications centre in the rear of the German retreat that followed the Soviet winter offensive of January 1945. It was also believed that Dresden might be used as an alternative to Berlin as the Reich capital.

The attack was part of a plan codenamed 'Thunderclap', designed to convince the Germans that the war was lost. It was drawn up in January 1945, when Hitler's Ardennes offensive, V2 rocket attacks on Britain and the deployment of snorkel-equipped U-boats clearly demonstrated that Germany was still capable of offering stubborn resistance. Strategic bombing attacks had

previously failed to break Germany, although they had proved valuable in reducing its capacity to wage war.

Now, on the night of 13/14 February 1945, Dresden was attacked by 800 RAF bombers, followed by 400 bombers of the United States Army Air Force. The bombing created a firestorm that destroyed 1,600 acres of Dresden. Even today it is still uncertain as to how many died and estimates have ranged from 25,000 to 135,000. Most authorities now put the death toll at around 35,000. The scale of destruction, the enormous death toll, and its timing at such a late stage in the war, have all ensured that the bombing of Dresden still remains highly controversial.

► Bomber boys page 36







## Belsen

### 17 April 1945: Bodies of dead prisoners at the newly liberated Belsen concentration camp

Belsen concentration camp was liberated by the British Army on 15 April 1945. The photographs, newsreel films and Richard Dimbleby's moving BBC broadcast from the camp sent a shockwave of horror and revulsion through Britain. Stories about concentration camps and the Nazi persecution and extermination of the Jews had been circulating since 1933, but this was the first time that the British public were faced with the reality of Hitler's Final Solution of the Jewish Question – the Holocaust. Even today it is not known for certain when the order to set about systematic extermination of European Jewry was given. But by December 1941, the first extermination camp at Chelmno in German-occupied Poland was in operation, while mass shootings of Soviet Jews had begun in June.

On 20 January 1942, a meeting of Nazi bureaucrats took place at Wannsee, near Berlin, to discuss the technicalities of the Final Solution. It is estimated that nearly six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, over 1.1 million in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, the largest extermination camp in German-occupied Poland. During the Second World War, Hitler's racial policies also claimed many millions of non-Jewish victims, including Soviet prisoners of war, those with mental and physical disabilities, gypsies (Roma and Sinti), homosexuals and Jehovah's Witnesses. The future Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie saw Belsen just after it was liberated. Years later he said, "A war that closed down Belsen was a war worth fighting".

► Auschwitz page 58



## Nagasaki

### 9 August 1945: Atomic bomb mushroom cloud over the Japanese city of Nagasaki

On 2 August 1939, Albert Einstein wrote a letter to President Roosevelt alerting him to the military potential of splitting the atom. Fears that German scientists might be working on an atomic bomb, prompted the Americans and British to set up the Manhattan Project to develop their own atomic weapon. It was successfully tested in the desert near Alamogordo in New Mexico on 16 July 1945 and the news was flashed to Roosevelt's successor Harry Truman, who was meeting Churchill and Stalin at Potsdam. Although the bomb had been conceived with Germany as the target, it was now seen as both a way of quickly ending the war with Japan, and as a lever to apply political pressure on the Russians.

Although the Japanese were warned that if they carried on fighting their homeland would face "utter devastation", they continued to resist with their usual fanaticism. Thus, the first atomic bomb to be used militarily, codenamed Little Boy, was dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. An estimated 78,000 people died and 90,000 others were seriously injured. Three days later a second bomb, Fat Man, was dropped on Nagasaki causing a similar loss of life. The dropping of the atomic bombs brought about the quick acceptance of Allied terms and Japan surrendered on 14 August 1945. The formal surrender took place on USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay on 2 September, six years and one day after the Germans invaded Poland.

► Hiroshima Countdown page 93

Terry Charman is senior historian at the Imperial War Museum London

## JOURNEYS

### Exhibitions

► Permanent displays at the Imperial War Museum London include **The Holocaust Exhibition** and **Turning Points: 1934–1945**. See [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk) for more information

### Book

► **Outbreak 1939: The World Goes to War** by Terry Charman (Virgin, 2009)



## Ray King:

# My local church held a memorial service for me

**W**HEN 17-YEAR-old Ray King was conscripted into the Royal Navy in 1940 he had little idea of the adventures awaiting him. Over the next six years he would travel the world and participate in most of Britain's major

engagements in the war. He did it all on a single ship: the destroyer HMS *Tartar*.

Born in Bristol, King was one of four brothers, all of whom went to war. In his training he excelled at coding and deciphering and so became a coder on board the *Tartar*. His task was to decipher signals that the ship received and decide what to do with the messages. It was highly pressurised work with a demanding schedule.

Following a short stint in Norway, the *Tartar* was tasked with escorting a convoy of merchant ships

to Malta. When they got to Gibraltar trouble arrived in the form of German U-boats. Another destroyer, the HMS *Foresight*, was rendered immobile so the *Tartar* was sent to protect her. "All of a sudden on our screens we saw a big ship and two small ships," says King. "The skipper said that as far as he knew none of our ships were there so it had to be foreigners. He said that we were going to torpedo the big ship and the small guns were going to sink the smaller ships. He went over the tannoy and wished us good luck, saying that we were a good crew and he wouldn't see many of us alive the next morning. But when we sailed closer we discovered it was the HMS *Nigeria*, which had been

torpedoed and was being escorted back to Gibraltar with two destroyers."

Fearing further attacks the captain then decided to sink the stricken *Foresight*. "We all had a laugh at the torpedo men," says King. "Imagine you've got a stationary ship and you fire a torpedo at it. Well they missed it! Eventually we had to sink it with gunfire."

During 1941 the *Tartar* protected the Atlantic convoys and that May it was present for the sinking of the fearsome German battleship *Bismarck*. Then following the German invasion of Russia it took part in the Arctic convoys, where King had to brave icy conditions and droves of enemy aircraft.

In 1942 the *Tartar* assisted with the Allied landings in North Africa, harassing German troops on land and preventing others arriving. It took part in one attack on a German convoy that sank an entire Panzer division.

After Africa, King found himself covering the 1943 invasion of Italy, beginning with the attack on Sicily. On 11 July he witnessed the sinking of the British hospital ship *Talamba*. "It was a night I shall never forget. She was painted white with red crosses and as she struck out to sea some stupid German came out and bombed her. We picked up some doctors, nurses and a few of the crew but she started to sink. As she went down we saw a nurse in one of the portholes. She was going down with that ship and she was terrified. We said we'd never have a live German as long as we lived after that. I saw men cry that night."

The following year the *Tartar* was busy on the French coast in preparation for D-Day. Three days after the landings she had a bruising encounter with a group of German destroyers. Several men were killed or wounded and the ship was badly damaged, forcing her to retire from the fight. Back in Bristol, King's family and friends heard about the incident on the radio. As he was unable to get a message home, his loved ones feared the worst. King had been a sidesman at his local church so the vicar decided to hold a memorial service. His wife, Joyce, then his girlfriend, attended the event. "Just before the service Ray had sent a telegram to his mother to say that he was alright," she recalls. "They kept the service for those in peril on the sea but when it came to the thing about Ray the vicar said, 'And we must thank God for the safety of Ray King who has just informed us that he is alright.'"

When the war in Europe was over King headed to the Far East. There the *Tartar* was the last British ship to sink Japanese vessels. It was also at Singapore for the Japanese surrender and afterwards King was stationed in Colombo, before returning to Britain in 1946.

Since the war King has been heavily involved in veteran work, notably with the Burma Star Association. Now 86, he has fond memories of his time in service. "Despite what I've been through I enjoyed the war, I really did," he says. "We had our bad days but overall my navy days were good days". ■

Ray King was speaking to Rob Attar



A photo of Ray King from his time in the navy



Ray and Joyce King in 2009. During the war he wrote to her every day

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# Fighter Boys

The Battle of Britain was a struggle we had to win. The fighter pilots who took the battle to the Germans in the air are now justly regarded as among our greatest heroes, but what were the men behind the flying suits really like? **Patrick Bishop** talked to the veteran airmen to find out

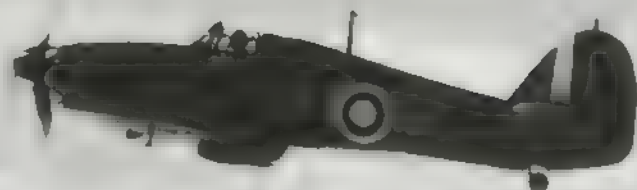






### Fighter Patrol

In the summer of 1940 huge masses of fighters and bombers were a familiar sight above the fields of Kent, Sussex and the Home Counties – and those below watched in horror as planes were shot down



**T**HE YOUNG men of Fighter Command who held the line against the Luftwaffe's onslaught on Britain in the summer of 1940 were heroes long before the battle was decided. As early as 20 August, when the fighting was at its fiercest, Winston Churchill told the House of Commons that the pilots were "turning the tide of world war by their prowess and devotion". He went on: "never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few". The four-month battle that took place in the skies over Britain's south coast became known as the Battle of Britain.

The image of the pilot – particularly the Spitfire pilot – gallantly taking to the air over and over again in his beautiful machine to knock down the invaders had already found a cherished place in British hearts. Official propagandists had no difficulty transforming their feats into a national – and before long an international – legend.

They were helped by the fact that Fighter Command in the summer of 1940 was perhaps the most socially mixed military elite that had ever existed. This was a people's war and the fighter pilots to some degree reflected the social composition of the nation. "The most striking

thing about (them) is their ordinariness," wrote a war artist who spent months travelling from base to base, drawing their portraits, "ordinary sons of ordinary parents from ordinary homes".

This was a slight exaggeration. There were few working-class boys to be found in the officers' mess. But most squadrons contained a much wider variety of backgrounds than would be found in the army or navy. In 32 Squadron, for example, its commander in the summer of 1940, Michael Crossley, had been at Eton, while John Proctor had left school at 14 to become an RAF apprentice. Others had joined through the RAF Volunteer Reserve, training in their spare time from mundane jobs. Oliver Houghton had been a fitter in a Coventry factory and William Higgins a teacher in a Derbyshire village school.

The one thing they all had in common was a passion for flying. Now that aviation has become so ordinary it is easy to forget the power that flight had over the imaginations of people in the 1930s, particularly young boys.

The record-breaking flights of the air aces, the Biggles books of Captain WE Johns describing life in the Royal Flying Corps over the Western Front, the flying circuses that criss-crossed the country offering a first flight for half a crown... all combined to make flying the most glamorous activity imaginable.

Before the war there were several ways into the RAF. For the comfortably off whose parents could afford to keep them on at school there was the chance of winning a place among the elite at the Cranwell cadet college. Alternatively, there were short service commissions on offer which guaranteed employment for a fixed number of years followed by a period in the reserve.

For the less well off, the apprentice schools gave boys the chance to learn a trade as a fitter, rigger or electrician with the prospect of pilot training if they proved outstanding. Many of the most skilful pilots in the Battle of Britain arrived there by this route.

You could also join the RAF on a part-time basis. Air-minded young men with a shared, usually upper-class background, banded together in regionally based auxiliary squadrons to fly in their spare time. Their less privileged equivalents took advantage of the Volunteer Reserve scheme, set up to fill the gaps in the ranks when war began, to train as pilots at weekends.

### Basic training

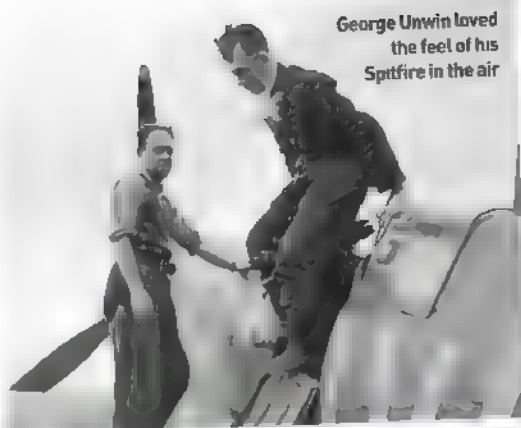
Training in the pre-war period and early days of the conflict was thorough but misguided. Pilots began their basic training in biplanes that were little different from those flown in the First

## Pilots on...

### Flying a Spitfire

**"I've never flown anything sweeter"** GEORGE UNWIN

When pilots made their debut in a Spitfire, it was almost always love at first sight. The speed, handling and sheer look of the aircraft was like nothing they had experienced or seen before. George Unwin of 19 Squadron remembered the extraordinary lightness of the controls: "There was no heaving or pulling and pushing and kicking, you just breathed on it. She really was the perfect flying machine. She would only spin if you made her and she would come straight out of it as soon as you applied opposite rudder and pushed the stick forward... I've never flown anything sweeter." Brian Kingcome of 92 Squadron believed "it had all the best qualities an aircraft could have. It was docile, it was fast, it was manoeuvrable, it was gentle... it did everything you asked of it". The note of the Merlin engine was instantly recognisable and remained a treasured memory for pilots.



George Unwin loved the feel of his Spitfire in the air



Spitfires were the cutting edge in aviation technology and the pilots enjoyed flying them



World War. After that, selectors assigned them to either fighter or bomber squadrons, depending on their skills.

Those chosen as fighter pilots then progressed to learning how to handle the monoplane Harvard trainer before making the great leap to the Hurricane or Spitfire. These aircraft were the latest in aviation technology, but the tactics taught before the war and at the start of the conflict had little connection with the new realities of aerial warfare.

Great emphasis was put on tight formation flying of the sort that captivated airshow crowds of the interwar years. It turned out to be no help in swirling dogfights. Very little attention was paid to the crucial skills of aerial gunnery and the manoeuvres needed to succeed and survive, so pilots still had much to learn when they were assigned to a squadron. Life on squadron bases before the Battle of Britain was a civilised affair, with flying in the morning and games most afternoons. Pilots were allowed to take their aircraft off to visit friends around the country.

The ethos of Fighter Command was decidedly public school. There was little talk of

politics and much emphasis on sport. Fighter pilots liked a drink and naturally gravitated to the pub at the end of the day. The racier ones headed for the bright lights of the nearest big town. In London they had their favourite watering holes: Hatchett's in Piccadilly and the Bag o' Nails in Beak Street, where they would drink until dawn with admiring females before racing back to the base to be ready for duty in the morning. These were innocent outings on the whole. "(It) never led to anything because you had to get back to the airfield," said one pilot, Geoffrey Page. "It was just schoolboy enthusiasm and mirth."

#### Tense atmosphere

A joking, insouciant atmosphere hung over the fighter stations. The lightheartedness, as they themselves recognised, was to some extent contrived, a mechanism to prevent them from thinking too closely about the reality they were experiencing during the battles of the summer of 1940. The days were long and exhausting. That summer the weather was usually glorious and the pilots came to pray for cloud and rain.

From first light they were on station, dozing in deckchairs at dispersal, waiting for the ring of the operations telephone ordering them to scramble. This was the lowest hour of the day when courage was at its most fragile, waiting for the arrival of the coffee wagon to dispel the beer taste lingering from the night before.

The order to get airborne was almost a relief, but most pilots, if they were honest, felt some level of fear most of the flying day. One, Peter Devitt, said later that he was "scared bloody stiff most of the time and anybody who says he wasn't frightened... was just as frightened as everybody else." But the level of fear climbed and fell away. In between the peaks were periods of excitement, even of boredom. No pilot could have operated if gripped by terror.

A few pilots cracked under the strain, to be dealt with sympathetically on the whole and transferred to other duties. Most mastered their feelings and struggled on. The main ➤

## Summer 1940: how the battle was won

### 8 July

After a lull following the Dunkirk evacuation and the fall of France the Luftwaffe begins harassing shipping in the English Channel and enticing the RAF to come up and fight. It is understood to be the beginning of a possible invasion of Britain.

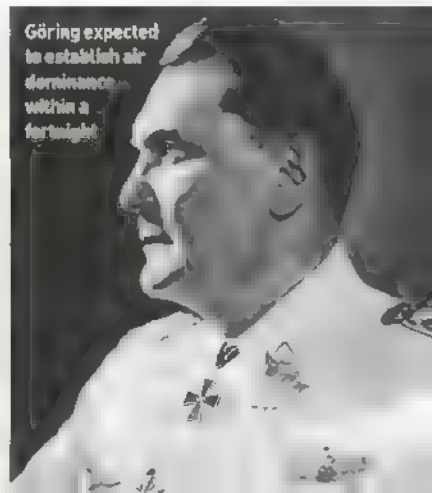
### 16 July

Hitler issues Directive No 16 announcing his decision to prepare a landing operation against England and if necessary to carry it out. It is given the code name 'Sealion'. He hopes that Britain will recognise its hopeless situation and sue for peace. The Channel Battle with attacks on convoys and ports continues for the rest of the month.

### 1 August

Goring, the Luftwaffe commander tells his senior officers that "the Führer has ordered me to crush Britain". The aim now is to neutralise the RAF and establish air superiority. He promises that "by delivering a series of very heavy blows I plan to have the enemy, whose morale is already at its lowest, on its knees". With his habitual over-confidence he estimates the operation will take about two weeks.

Göring expected to establish air dominance within a fortnight







Pilots were inspired by the desire not to let down their comrades; a strong squadron spirit improved success and survival rates. 1 Squadron was well-established and had served in the First World War

## Why was the Battle of Britain so important?

THE VICTORY over the Luftwaffe was of huge importance in the overall history of the war. Until this point Hitler's forces had carried all before them, winning easily in Poland and against their historic enemy, France. Allied to the Soviet Union, it seemed as if nothing could prevent Germany from exercising an unchallenged hegemony over Europe. By beating off the threat of invasion, the RAF ensured Britain's survival as a focus of opposition to Hitler. Britain, for the time being, stood alone. But by fighting so valiantly and successfully it sent a message to the rest of the world and particularly to America, that the Nazi war machine was not actually invincible.

This was the first battle in history that had been decided by air power alone and the Luftwaffe had lost it, sustaining its worst defeat of the war. It was never quite the same again. The RAF could now approach its next task of taking the war to Germany with confidence. Churchill realised the huge propaganda value of the battle in winning allies against Hitler and played it for all it was worth, using it to persuade America that it could not stay out of the war. But its significance as a feat of arms can hardly be overestimated. If the RAF had not won the Battle of Britain, the world would today be a very different place.

## Pilots on... Waiting to take off

"Hanging around was the worst part" ROBIN APPLEFORD



Robin Appleford, seen here off duty with friends

Waiting at dispersal for the call from the control room to scramble was nerve-wracking. The imminence of danger made it impossible to relax. "Hanging around was the worst part, waiting for the bloody phone to ring," said Robin Appleford of 66 Squadron. But the call did at least dispel the vapour of unease. He found that "as soon as you started running out to the aircraft, once you started the engine, you were all right."



### 13 August

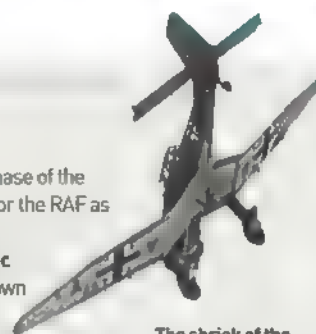
The Luftwaffe launches 'Eagle Day', the first big attack of the new strategy. It ends badly for the Germans with a loss of 47 aircraft and 89 pilots and crew killed or taken prisoner. Only three RAF pilots die, a comforting statistic in what, it is clear, is the start of a battle of attrition.

### 15-16 August

The raiders focus their attention on RAF fighter stations, attacking forward bases and radar sites. Then, on the night of August 24/25, due to a navigation error, bombs hit central London for the first time.

### 24 August - 6 September

The most daunting phase of the battle and the worst for the RAF as relentless attacks on airfields and strategic installations ground down Fighter Command's reserves of machines and men. Senior officers wonder how much longer they can withstand the assault.



The shriek of the Ju 87 Stuka dive bomber terrified ground troops, but it was an easy target for the RAF

### 7 September

Believing the RAF to be finished, and in revenge for RAF attacks on Berlin, Göring switches targets and directs his forces to London. The target is the docks. East London is set ablaze and more than 300 killed. The raids will continue with one exception for 76 consecutive nights.

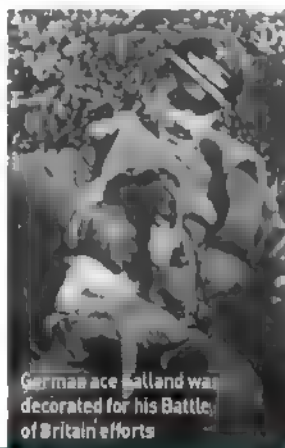
## Why the Germans thought they would win

IN THE EARLY summer of 1940 the pilots of the German air fleets pleasantly quartered along the north coast of France were in a buoyant mood. The previous September they had smashed the obsolete aircraft – but not the magnificent spirit – of the Polish airforce. In May they had made short work of the French Armée de L'Air. Now, it seemed, it was Britain's turn. Some of the pilots said after the war that they approached the task with reluctance. If true, that did not affect the efficiency and energy with which they followed their orders.

The Luftwaffe crews had something in common with their RAF counterparts. They loved flying and the camaraderie of their squadrons. They tended to be more experienced, some pilots having fought against the Republicans in Spain. They included Adolf Galland, the great Messerschmitt ace, who

was heavily rewarded with honours by a regime which was as keenly aware as the British of the public relations value of their feats.

Luftwaffe fighter tactics were superior to those of the RAF at the outset. They had devised a flying formation that reduced the risk from an invisible enemy. The bomber crews were resourceful and



German ace Galland was decorated for his Battle of Britain efforts

adept at sticking together to provide the maximum mutual protection to each other.

Right until the closing phases of the battle they believed they would win. RAF pilots who, in keeping with an old First World War tradition, entertained captured enemies, were surprised at their cockiness. This was due in part to the message they had received from their commander, Hermann Göring, who underestimated Fighter Command's resources and spirit. In the end it was the Luftwaffe's morale that weakened. After 15 September, when they found that the RAF resistance was as strong as ever, enthusiasm diminished.

After the war, many of those who survived were to look back on the Battle of Britain as a struggle among equals that was as close to chivalry as modern war would allow.

motivation keeping the pilots going was the desire not to let down their squadron comrades, the dynamic that powers every conflict. A strong squadron spirit minimised losses and improved the chance of success. Usually that was created from the top, and Fighter Command was fortunate to be well stocked with inspirational leaders like Brian Kingcome and Pete Brothers who, leading by example, created an atmosphere of confidence and bolstered morale.

### The winning spirit

It was essentially the question of spirit that decided the Battle of Britain. The RAF and the Luftwaffe were facing each other on roughly equal terms. The balance of forces was less disadvantageous to Britain than the first propaganda accounts suggested. British pilots and aeroplanes were a match for their Luftwaffe counterparts. After the failure of the Germans to deliver an early knock-out blow the contest

became a battle of attrition in which stamina and attitude would prove to be decisive.

The RAF pilots were sustained by a triple patriotism: to their unit, to their country, and to humanity in general. Many pilots had been indifferent to the rise of Nazism and felt no particular animosity towards Germany before the outbreak of the war. But looking down from the sunlit skies of south-east England at the great formations of aircraft, painted with black crosses, moving across the channel to bomb their loved ones, any detachment disappeared. In the end it was the differing quality of morale that tipped the balance. The Spitfire and Hurricane pilots were fighting for all that was most dear to them and were determined to win at any cost. Remarkably few of them ever entertained any thought of losing.

The Germans were coasting along on a wave of euphoria generated by their relatively easy victories in Poland, the Low Countries and

## Pilots on...

### Losing your friends

**"You just said 'poor old so-and-so's bought it' and that was it"** GEORGE UNWIN

The hectic pace of the battle and the necessity to maintain morale meant that losses were not dwelt on openly. "You didn't spend days moping around," said George Unwin of 19 Squadron. "You just said 'poor old so-and-so's bought it' and that was it."

## Pilots on...

### Facing the Germans

**"I found myself looking at him with loathing"**

BRIAN KINGCOME

Pilots tended to take a detached attitude towards the Germans as a worthy foe until the fighting began in earnest. Then feelings changed. Brian Kingcome remembered looking at the body of a German airman he had helped to shoot down. "Gazing at the young man lying in front of me I could not accept that he had been some kind of non-political combatant. He seemed too close to the ideal Aryan mould cherished by Hitler to be a coincidence or accident, and any charitable thoughts I might normally have harboured simply remained frozen... I found myself looking at him with loathing."

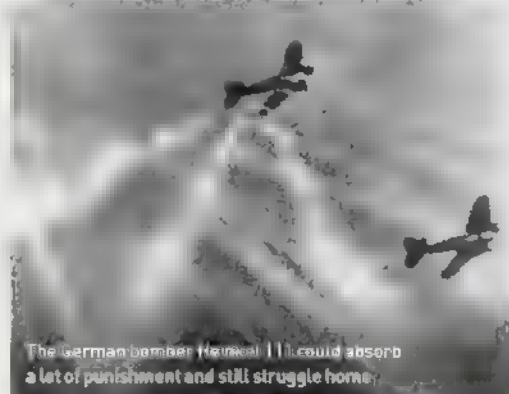


Brian Kingcome tries to relax before the inevitable order to scramble

HARPERCOLL NS/MRS L K KINGCOME/IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

### 15 September

On a fine, early autumn day the Luftwaffe launch successive waves of bombers against London. Contrary to what the German crews have been told, the RAF are ready and waiting for them and **the Luftwaffe suffer their worst losses of the battle to date**. Fighter Command's casualties are relatively slight. Though no-one yet knows it, a turning point has been reached and this day will be designated **Battle of Britain Day**.



The German bomber Heinkel 111 could absorb a lot of punishment and still struggle home.

### 17 September

Codebreakers intercept a message from Hitler ordering the removal of landing equipment, necessary for any landing, from Luftwaffe airfields on the continent. It looks as if **Operation Sealion has been postponed** by the Germans.

### 31 October

For the first time since the battle began **neither side loses a man nor an aeroplane**. From now on the RAF will be on the offensive.



Members of 610 Squadron based at Hawkinge take a noonday break between sorties



## Pilots on... Dogfights

**"Tracers passed above and below, giving the impression of flying in a gigantic cage of gilt wire"**

TOM GLEAVE

All pilots were to find that their first experience of a dogfight bore little relation to anything they had trained for. First there was the difficulty of shooting at a fast, nimble target. In order to hit it you had to shoot in front of it to take account of its speed – deflection shooting. This produced some unexpected effects. Tom Gleave of 253 Squadron described flying through a mass of Messerschmitt 109s. Tracers passed above and below, curving downwards and giving the impression of flying in a gigantic cage of gilt wire. They also discovered, like Tim Vigors of 222 Squadron, that these encounters rarely lasted more than a few minutes and the action could fade with strange suddenness. "A moment before the whole sky had been filled with circling and diving aircraft," he wrote of his first time in action, "and now there was not one of them to be seen."

## Pilots on... Baling out

**"...with this cold metal ring and burned hand it was like an electric shock"** GEOFFREY PAGE



Geoffrey Page shot his trousers over the Channel

Most pilots never made a parachute descent until they were forced to. Geoffrey Page was shot up over the Channel, turned his Spitfire on its back and fell out. Free of the machine he found himself "tumbling head over heels

through space. I remember seeing my right arm extended and I sort of looked at it. My brain ordered it to bring itself in and pull the metal ring of the ripcord on the parachute, and that was agony because with this cold metal ring and badly burned hand it was like an electric shock." Looking down he noticed quite a funny thing had happened. My left shoe and my trousers had been blown off completely by the explosion.

## Pilots on...

### Off-duty relaxation

**"He'd got a bunch of chaps in the car and was calling up the bar"** PETE BROTHERS

On the long summer evenings flying did not finish until just before dusk and there was then a race to get to the pub before closing time. At Biggin Hill, pilots would often be driven there by the station commander, Dick Grice. Pete Brothers of 32 Squadron remembered he had a tannoy speaker which he would use to order drinks. "He'd got a bunch of chaps in the car and was calling up the bar. You could hear this booming across the countryside."



Pete Brothers enjoyed a few off-duty drinks

France. As it became clear that, despite the boasts of their commander Hermann Göring, the RAF would not fold before them, their confidence began to falter. The daily attacks slackened. Then one day at the end of October, for the first time since the early summer, the Germans failed to come at all and the pilots could begin to dare to believe that the Battle of Britain had been won. ■

Patrick Bishop is the author of *Battle of Britain: A Day-by-Day Chronicle 10 July – 31 Oct* (Quercus, 2009)

## JOURNEYS

### Book

► **Battle of Britain: A Day-by-Day Chronicle 10 July – 31 October** by Patrick Bishop (Quercus, 2009)

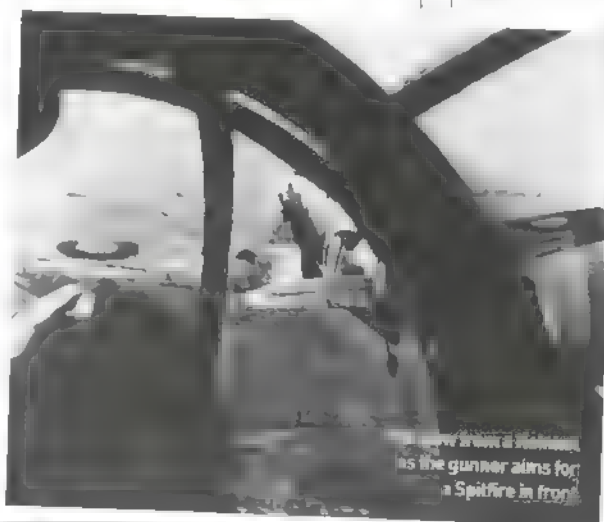
### Places to visit

- **RAF Museum London**  
[www.rafmuseum.org.uk](http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk) ☎ 020 6205 2266
- **RAF Museum Cosford**  
[www.rafmuseum.org.uk](http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk) ☎ 01902 376 200
- **IWM Duxford**  
[www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk) ☎ 01223 835 000
- **Spitfire and Hurricane Memorial Museum, Kent**, [www.spitfiremuseum.org.uk](http://www.spitfiremuseum.org.uk)  
☎ 01843 821940
- **Tangmere Aviation Museum** West Sussex  
[www.tangmere-museum.org.uk](http://www.tangmere-museum.org.uk)  
☎ 01243 790 090
- **Kent Battle of Britain Museum, Kent**  
[www.kbbm.org](http://www.kbbm.org) ☎ 01303 893140

### Websites

- **RAF Battle of Britain homepage** includes background and daily reports of the battle.  
[www.raf.mod.uk/campaign/battle-of-britain-75th/](http://www.raf.mod.uk/campaign/battle-of-britain-75th/)
- Find out more about the **Battle of Britain**

**BBC** on the BBC website at [www.bbc.co.uk/archive/battleofbritain/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/battleofbritain/)



as the gunner aims for a Spitfire in front



# HITLER VERSUS AMERICA

WHY DID HITLER DECIDE TO  
DECLARE WAR ON THE USA?

**Ian Kershaw** examines Hitler's  
seemingly inexplicable declaration  
of war against America in 1941

**Method or madness?**  
Adolf Hitler wanted to keep the  
USA out of Europe as long as  
possible, yet declared war in 1941



**E**ARLY DECEMBER 1941 was a momentous point when two wars at opposite ends of the world – in Europe and in the Far East – became joined in one colossal global conflict. On 7 December, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Four days later, Hitler took Germany into war against the United States of America.

Hitler's move seems one of the most puzzling decisions of the Second World War: to declare war on a country possessing immense economic and military might, with no weaponry or strategy in place to attack, let alone defeat, her, and precisely at the time of trying to fend off a dangerous counter-offensive by the Red Army in what, against early expectations, had become a bitter and protracted war in the Soviet Union. What prompted Hitler to take a decision which seems so bizarre, so predictably self-destructive? Can it be put down simply to an expression of his rampant megalomania? Was it purely a reckless gamble with Germany's existence as a nation, with no prospect of success, a sign of unbelievable strategic idiocy, a move of utter madness by a sick leader?

In the early period of Nazi rule America scarcely figured in the formulation of foreign policy. Hitler did not mention the USA when he laid out his strategic imperatives to his military commanders in November 1937. America remained largely an irrelevance to Hitler during 1938, as Germany swallowed up Austria, then the Sudetenland. But the outrage in the USA about the terrible pogroms in November that year sharpened the antagonism towards Germany, at the same time intensifying Hitler's paranoia about the power of Jewish warmongers in America.

This was part of the background to Hitler's notorious 'prophecy' on 30 January 1939 that, in the event of another war caused, as he saw it, by Jewish finance, the Jews would be destroyed. That was followed by a ferocious verbal assault on US president Roosevelt by Hitler in a Reichstag speech three months later. By this time the Nazi leadership saw America as a potential future enemy, lined up on Britain's side, in a war that was looming.

## What prompted Hitler to take a decision which seems so bizarre, so predictably self-destructive?

This meant thinking strategically, not just ideologically, about America. The key concern was to keep the USA out of the European conflict until Germany had won it. There was no immediate worry. A shift to belligerency, it was reckoned, could not take place before the US presidential election that was due in November 1940. And the prominent strain of isolationism in the country and in Congress posed an obstacle to intervention. This could in any case be militarily ruled out for the foreseeable future. In spring 1940, the US regular army ranked 20th in the world, one place behind the Dutch army, and comprised only 245,000 men, with a mere five fully equipped divisions – Germany engaged 141 divisions in the western campaign alone. Even so, America was rearming fast. German prognoses were that it would be something like a year and a half before American military and economic potential could make itself felt. Hitler spoke of his confidence that he would have "solved all problems in Europe" long before the Americans could intervene. But "woe betide us if we're not finished by then", he had privately commented.

The thought lay behind the decision, taken in effect within a month after the stunning victory over France, to attack the Soviet Union. Though the underlying motivation was ideological, the urgency was strategic. Britain, against the odds, was still in the war. Forcing her into submission through an invasion was such a risky proposition that Hitler and the German navy were reluctant to undertake it.

## Would America have declared war on Germany?

BY DECLARING WAR on the USA on 11 December 1941, Hitler spared Roosevelt a tricky decision. Immediately following the Pearl Harbor attack, the president and his advisers deliberated whether to declare war on Germany, a move which would undoubtedly have faced serious opposition in Congress. They decided there was no need. They were reading Japanese intelligence signals and were aware of the agreement between Germany and Japan. They knew that a German declaration of war was imminent.

Even without the German move, however, full American involvement in the European war would have been likely in the near future. Confronting the threat from Germany had always been seen as the priority by the US administration. Escalation of the war in the Atlantic was inevitable.

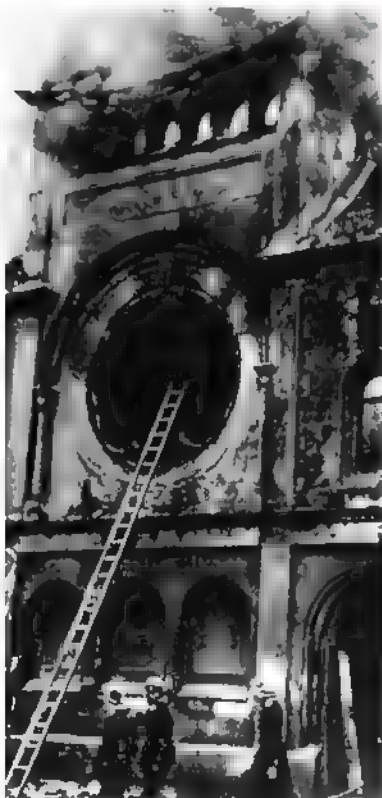
Beyond this, the Victory Program was predicated upon sending a major land force to fight in Europe. The war could not, therefore, have been confined to the Pacific. Possibly Roosevelt could in the short term have avoided a formal declaration against Germany. But the intensification of the Atlantic war and American strategic plans meant that a US declaration could almost certainly not have been long delayed, even had Hitler not pre-empted it.



Roosevelt declares war on Japan, 1941



US ships after Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, which brought America into the Second World War



'Kristallnacht', the attack on Germany's Jews in 1938, sharpened US antagonism to Germany

## Hitler was ecstatic at the news of Pearl Harbor... "We can't lose the war at all," he exclaimed

Destroying the Soviet Union in a rapid campaign lasting only a few weeks seemed a better option. Britain would then be compelled to negotiate. And America, a growing danger as long as Britain remained in the war, would (such was the thinking) then keep to her own hemisphere. Germany would have won. On the other hand, the longer the war continued, with Britain undefeated, the more American might would tell, as it had done in 1917–18. "We must solve all continental European problems in 1941," Hitler told his chief military adviser, General Alfred Jodl, in December 1940, "since from 1942 onwards the United States will be in a position to intervene".

Hitler had cause to worry. The passing of the Lend-Lease bill by the US Congress in March 1941 gave the clearest indication that an undefeated

Britain would, over time, be able to call upon immeasurable American resources to help the war effort. And in July 1941 US army planners began work on a 'Victory Program', which assumed that only American entry into the war could ensure Germany's total military defeat, and envisaged sending a huge force of around five million men to fight in Europe. This army was to be ready by 1 July 1943.

By the time the German invasion of the Soviet Union began on 22 June 1941, Japan was playing a vital part in Hitler's strategic thinking. During the euphoric early phase of the eastern campaign, when it looked as if victory was imminent, Hitler suggested to the Japanese ambassador in Berlin, Oshima, that Germany and Japan should jointly destroy both the Soviet Union and the USA. He had already, ➤



## Hitler's other key decisions

The deeds and errors of judgement that cemented Hitler's disreputable place in history



Troops advance into the Ukraine during Operation Barbarossa, 1941

### 1 Why did he attack the Soviet Union?

Hitler had, of course, since the 1920s envisaged war against the Soviet Union to acquire 'living-space' for Germany and destroy 'Jewish-Bolshevism'. These underlying ideological motives were undiminished in 1940.

But the concrete plan to attack the USSR without delay, in June 1941, was driven by strategic considerations. Despite France's defeat, Britain refused to contemplate a negotiated end to the war. And behind Britain loomed the spectre of America. Hitler knew that time was not on Germany's side. He had to end the war quickly. British hopes, in his view, rested on the Soviet Union. Unless he acted, he claimed, the USSR could stir up trouble in the Balkans or even, incited by Britain, attack Germany. The way to force Britain to the conference table, he asserted, was to crush the Soviet Union in a rapid assault. America would then keep out of the European war. Victory would be Germany's.

### 2 Why didn't he invade Britain?

Why did Hitler not invade Britain in 1940? The failure to secure control of the skies finally led to the invasion being called off in September. But Hitler had been sceptical about the idea from the start. The navy leadership, too, was extremely dubious that a successful landing could be accomplished.

The key worry was that intervention by the British navy would prevent the transport of troops and cut off those already landed. Nor could the necessary preparations be carried out before the onset of bad weather in the Channel. An invasion could not then take place before the following spring. The German navy leadership, even in July, wanted the enterprise to be postponed. Hitler deferred the decision until it could be seen whether the Luftwaffe could bomb Britain into submission. But the invasion was never very likely. Hitler preferred to attack the Soviet Union. It was seen as less risky.



This 1940 German map shows the invasion plan for Operation Sealion. It was never put into action

### 3 Why did he instigate the Holocaust?

Hitler had declared in January 1939 that in the event of another world war the Jews would be destroyed. How this would come about was unclear. But there was an awful, inexorable logic to the emergence of full-scale genocide in 1941, even if the actual steps that year which culminated in the 'Final Solution' followed no clear blueprint. Hitler's role in this process, though shadowy, was indispensable. The killing of Soviet Jews which began with the invasion of the USSR in June was by August extended to include women and children. But the planned deportation of millions of non-Soviet Jews into the USSR soon became impossible because the war could not be ended. With Hitler's decision in September to deport the Reich Jews 'to the east' acute pressures nevertheless built up to find a 'solution'. By the end of the year, Poland was emerging as the location, and gassing as the method.



Jews are deported to concentration camps from Minden in Germany, 13 December 1941

in fact, briefly envisaged establishing bases on the Azores from where long-range bombers could attack the east coast of America. By mid August 1941, however, it was plain that the swift knockout of the USSR had not succeeded. The war would drag on. And it was just a matter of time before America entered it.

### Hitler's invincible ally

Hitler's hopes now rested, therefore, in no small part on full-scale war between Japan and America. This would, he imagined, keep the USA fully engaged in the Pacific, diverting them from the Atlantic and the war in Europe, and leave Germany time to finish off the Soviet Union.

Hitler had already indicated the previous April, in fact, that "Germany would promptly take part in the event of a conflict between Japan and America, for the strength of the allies in the Tripartite Pact (signed the previous September by Japan, Germany and Italy) lay in their acting in common. Their weakness would be in allowing themselves to be defeated separately". The comment hints at Hitler's reasons for declaring war on the USA in December.

Meanwhile, President Roosevelt was determined to exploit Hitler's 'diversion' in the east and gradually stepped up



A US cutter drops a depth charge in its hunt for German U-boats in 1941 as part of Roosevelt's Atlantic 'shoot on sight' policy

## "A great power doesn't let itself have war declared on it, it declares war itself" Ribbentrop remarked

what he referred to as an "undeclared war" in the Atlantic. In the autumn, the number of incidents involving American shipping and German U-boats increased. In September, Roosevelt adroitly embellished one such incident to justify the escorting of convoys by American warships and a "shoot on sight" policy against German submarines. The head of the German navy, Grand Admiral Raeder, was champing at the bit to retaliate. But Hitler, as he had done all summer, held him back. The German dictator fumed, but felt his hands tied in the Atlantic.

He desperately wanted Japan to open up hostilities in the Pacific. When the outrightly hawkish General Tojo became the prime minister of Japan in mid-October 1941, German hopes were raised. On 5 November the

Japanese made a tentative enquiry about "a German assurance not to conclude a separate peace or armistice in case of a Japanese-American war". Hitler's foreign minister, Ribbentrop, quickly agreed that in the event of war between Japan or Germany and the USA, any armistice would only be concluded jointly. He was happy to have this made into a formal agreement. The Japanese now sought precisely such a binding commitment that Germany would offer military support in a war against the USA, even if Japan started it – a contingency not covered by the Tripartite Pact.

By the end of November, as the Japanese decision to go to war against the USA was being taken, Ribbentrop provided the assurance that Germany would join the war immediately, and that there would be no separate peace

Hitler's hopes of Japan attacking the USA were realised when General Tojo became Japan's PM



under any circumstances. "The Führer is determined on that point", he declared. The drafting of the new agreement went ahead. But it was still not signed when Japanese planes attacked Pearl Harbor.

Hitler was ecstatic at the news of Pearl Harbor. He spoke of the Japanese attack as "a deliverance". "We can't lose the war at all," he exclaimed. "We now have an ally which has never been conquered in 3,000 years." Those around him swiftly drew the conclusion that Germany would now declare war on the USA. In fact, it took a few days to assemble the Reichstag and make the necessary preparations. But significantly, without waiting for a formal declaration, Hitler removed the shackles from his U-boats and gave them free licence to attack American shipping. He told Ribbentrop two days before the declaration that the main reason for Germany opening up warfare against the USA was that





"the United States is already shooting against our ships. They have been a forceful factor in this war, and they have, through their actions, already created a situation which is practically, let's say, of war".

On 11 December, just before Hitler's speech to the Reichstag, the new, important agreement with Japan was signed. The key clause ruled out an armistice with the USA or Britain without mutual consent. Hitler now had a formal agreement with an ally which he thought invincible. America, such was his thinking, would be held down in the Pacific. Moreover, with German entry, she would be faced with a two-front war. The necessary spread of US resources, however formidable, would give Germany the opportunity to win the war in Europe before America could make a difference there.

But, above all, Japanese entry gave Germany the chance to turn the tables in the Atlantic. "Our U-boat commanders had reached the point where they didn't know any longer whether or not they should fire their torpedoes," he told Nazi Party leaders on the day after the declaration. "A U-boat war can't be won in the long run if the U-boats are not free to fire."

For Hitler, as these remarks make clear, the one-sided state of "undeclared war" with America was the main reason for his decision. He now had the opportunity and justification for opening up all-out submarine warfare in the Atlantic, something he had been itching to do all summer and autumn. It was his only way of attacking America. And without forcing the USA onto the retreat, possibly to concessions, and breaking the convoy supplies to Britain, the war could not be ended. Pearl Harbor

Von Ribbentrop announces that Germany has invaded the Soviet Union, June 1941

provided the occasion. And the newly reached agreement with Japan, which ruled out a separate peace, offered the safeguard he needed.

One other factor in the decision was of importance: prestige. "A great power doesn't let itself have war declared on it, it declares war itself," Ribbentrop remarked – doubtless echoing Hitler. It was certain in Hitler's mind that war with the USA could not be avoided for much longer. Propaganda considerations demanded that the decision be in German, not American, hands. Whether, in fact, Roosevelt would have been bold enough to seek from Congress a declaration of war against Germany as well as Japan is questionable. As it was, Hitler took the quandary away from the American president.

So was it a puzzle? From Hitler's perspective, it was only pre-empting the inevitable. It was consistent with his long-standing view that the USA would always stand in Germany's way. It matched his strong fear that time was against Germany. It accorded with his instincts for prestige and propaganda. It was taken at a euphoric moment when "the Asian conflict drops like

a present into our lap", as Goebbels put it. Above all, it had an internal rationale: make sure that Japan stays in the war to hold down the Americans in the Pacific, weaken the British in the Far East, force the USA into a two-ocean war, and use the U-boats to turn the tables on Roosevelt in the Atlantic, severing supplies to Britain and allowing Germany the time to defeat the Soviets in the east or at least force them to a peace on German terms.

The decision was, therefore, no puzzle. But it was madness all the same – part of the madness behind the entire German gamble for world power. **III**

Sir Ian Kershaw, former professor of modern history at Sheffield University, is one of the world's leading authorities on Hitler

#### JOURNEYS

##### Book

► **Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions that Changed the World 1940–41** by Ian Kershaw (Allen Lane, 2007)

► **Prelude to Downfall. Hitler and the United States, 1939–1941** by Saul Friedlander (Chatto and Windus, 1967)

► **Hitler, 1936–1945: Nemesis** by Ian Kershaw (Allen Lane, 2000)

### Why didn't Japan declare war on Russia?

FOR SIX WEEKS in summer 1941, Japanese leaders assessed the merits of attacking the Soviet Union. Attractive though the option appeared to some factions, it was revealed on closer examination to be extremely risky.

A key factor was Japan's significant military inferiority on the Soviet border. Opponents argued that a reduction of about half of Soviet ground forces and two-thirds of the air force in the Far East would be needed for a Japanese attack to be contemplated. (The memory of the 1939 war on the Mongolian border, when 17,000 Japanese troops had been killed or injured no doubt played its part in the caution.) Japanese forces for an attack on the Soviet Union could in any case not be ready before late August. And operations would have to be completed by mid-October, when the Siberian winter set in. The timetable was extremely tight.

Beyond this, the Japanese were less confident than Hitler that Germany would swiftly defeat the Soviet Union. So a policy of wait-and-see was adopted towards the northern plan. An advance to the south, to which the Japanese were already committed, still seemed a more attractive proposition. The most likely outcome to an attack on the Soviet Union would have been defeat for Japan, not victory for

the Axis powers. It would, however, have altered the overall course of the war. In such an event, a weakened Japan would probably have been forced to back away from the southern advance and certain confrontation with the USA.

A Soviet poster exhorting soldiers to fight bravely, 1941



# I was there

**Ron Bosworth:**

## I faced bombers, battleships and mines on the high seas

**M**ERCHANT SEAMAN Ron Bosworth sailed all over the globe during the war, but the only time he was wounded was off the coast of South Wales. He was travelling on the *Port Townsville* en route to America in 1941 when two German bombers emerged overhead. "I can remember as plain as day," says Bosworth. "I was at the wheel and I could see these blinking things coming at us like mosquitoes. In the end the skipper stopped the ship because it was hopeless. A bomber dropped a bomb and I got down from the wheel and went down to get my mate who was still asleep. I chucked him out of the bunk and we both crawled along the deck. Then they started to machine gun us. The stuff came up in my face and I've got marks where it hit." Eventually Bosworth made it to a lifeboat and struck out from the ship, braving ten-foot waves before a French corvette rescued him and took him back to England.

He had had a lucky escape. Many of his comrades were less fortunate. Over the course of the war close to

200,000 people served in the Merchant Navy and around 30,000 lost their lives. Merchant seamen played a vital role delivering supplies to Britain and other parts of the empire. Without their efforts Britain would have lost the war.

Bristol-born Bosworth went to sea aged 14 in 1938. He began as a deck boy on a banana boat. Within a year he was an ordinary seaman and became a sailor in 1940. By then the war had intervened and his work assumed a heightened level of importance. During the early years of the conflict Bosworth made several voyages to North America and Australasia, picking up food and other materials to bring back to Britain, usually as part of a convoy. It was treacherous work. Mines put a couple of his ships out of action, while even greater menaces lurked in the open waters.

In November 1940 Bosworth had a memorable encounter with the pocket battleship *Admiral Scheer*. He was travelling back from Canada with a cargo of meat on the *Jamaican Producer* when the German warship appeared. An auxiliary cruiser in his convoy, the *Jervis Bay*, headed out to meet her. "She was only a converted cargo ship with six-inch guns, whereas the *Scheer* had anything up to 12 or more inch guns. You can imagine what they did to her," he recalls. "They just blew her out of the water". As another of the escorts rescued survivors, the *Jamaican Producer* took evasive action. "She could go at 22 knots and we could dodge anything so we went like a greyhound back to England".

Aerial attacks were also a regular threat. Once, off the Bay of Biscay, the steamer that Bosworth was sailing on broke down just as a German aeroplane hove into view. "A big four-engine bomber appeared in the sky right above us and started to drop his bombs.

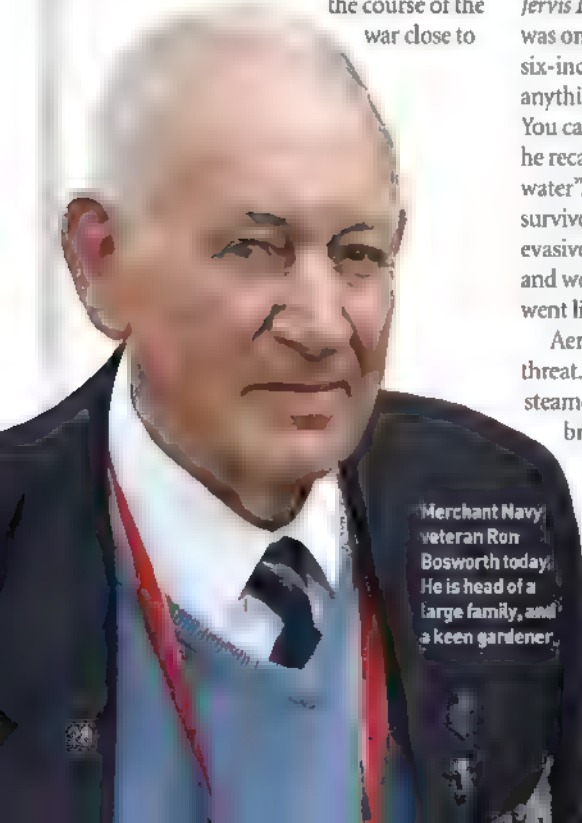
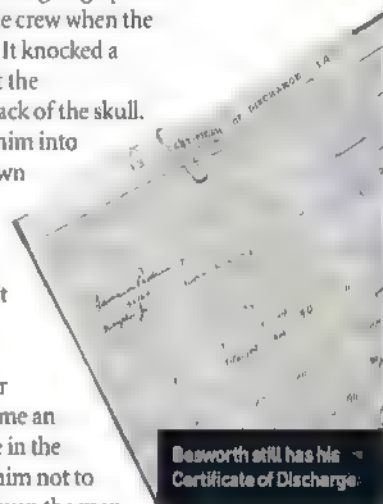
Fortunately he was that

far up that he couldn't hit us. It was very lucky because we had a lot of ammunition on board. Then the engineer mended the link in the engine and we got under way but the bombs that missed us did make a dent in the counter-stern of the ship."

When he wasn't dodging the enemy, Bosworth discovered that weather could be an equally violent foe. Journeying around the Cape of Good Hope was especially perilous and on one occasion it proved to be fatal. "I was going up the deck with the rest of the crew when the sea came over the side. It knocked a ventilator off which hit the quartermaster in the back of the skull. He was in agony. I got him into a cabin, lashed him down onto a seat but all we could do for him was give him morphine to cure the pain. He didn't survive."

Despite the risks, Bosworth signed up for further voyages each time an assignment ended. Late in the war his mother urged him not to take another ship and even the man at the shipping office asked if he had had enough, but he persevered. Bosworth's final job took him out to the Far East where he transported prisoners back to Australia and repatriated British empire troops that had been serving out there. He didn't arrive home until May 1946, over a year after the war in Europe had finished.

Reflecting on his experiences today, Bosworth explains that he never lost faith in a British victory. "I was confident that we would win," he says. "I couldn't see how anybody could think we could let a country like that, with the people they had in charge, come over here. If we hadn't done what we had done, what would have happened to our nation? We would have been wiped out." **II**  
Ron Bosworth was speaking to Rob Attar



Merchant Navy veteran Ron Bosworth today. He is head of a large family, and a keen gardener.



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# The Battle of the River Plate

It was a triumph for Allied tactics and political power, and the end of one of Germany's finest naval commanders. **Eric Grove** looks back to the story of the *Graf Spee* and the River Plate

## No surrender

Explosions rip through the disabled *Admiral Graf Spee* in Montevideo harbour, 1939

**A**T THE OUTBREAK of war on 3 September 1939 Germany had at sea two of its so-called 'armoured ships' or in German

*Panzerschiffe*. Generally nicknamed 'pocket battleships', the *Panzerschiffe* had been designed to be as powerful as possible within the severe restrictions of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles which limited Germany's ability to rearm itself, specifically stating that the German navy should have no vessel over 10,000 tons. They had been originally built for operations against the French navy in the North Sea and Baltic, but now their role was commerce raiding, sinking Allied merchantmen in the open ocean.

The prototype *Panzerschiff*, *Deutschland*, was in the north Atlantic, where the rapidly introduced convoy system soon neutralised it. The other, *Admiral Graf Spee*, encountered only individual merchant ships as she cruised in the south Atlantic. Her captain, Hans Langsdorff, was a humane and skilful seaman with a keen sense of both honour and humour. He enjoyed creating chaos on the British sea routes and tweaking the tail of the lion that had defeated his service and his country in 1918.

*Graf Spee* took her first ship, the *Clement*, at the end of September 1939, followed by the *Newton Beech* on 5 October, *Ashlea* on 7 October and *Huntsman* on 10 October. She refuelled from her auxiliary tanker *Alimark* and

## He enjoyed tweaking the tail of the lion that had defeated his service

then sank the *Trevanion* on 22 October before refuelling again and making off round the Cape of Good Hope. Heavy seas created problems for the none-too-seaworthy German unit that had never been designed for such conditions. Thus in November, Langsdorff only had one success, boarding and sinking the coastal tanker *Africa Shell*, on the 15th. However he had made it seem to the British that there was perhaps an additional German raider at large in the Indian ocean. The *Graf Spee* again braved the heavy seas south of the Cape to meet *Alimark* once more.

At that point, Langsdorff dropped a bombshell on his officers. Until that

# The battle of the Atlantic

Battleships, codebreaking and torpedoes – how the Allies finally defeated Hitler's U-Boat wolf packs

ON THE DAY that Britain declared war on Germany, 3 September 1939, the British liner *Athenia* was torpedoed by a U-boat. Merchant shipping in the north Atlantic was immediately put into convoy protected by warships. It was critical to maintain the movement of such ships between Britain and the outside world to keep up stores of food and materials. Convoys in the north Atlantic and raider hunting groups in more distant waters countered both the submarine and surface threats, of which the *Graf Spee* was notable

The Germans, however, gained a major advantage when they captured bases on the coast of France. This allowed them much better access to the Atlantic. They were also able to put into effect wolf pack tactics in which groups of submarines attacked individual convoys. The British were not helped at this time by the need to deploy potential convoy escorts against the invasion threat to the homeland. In September and October convoys suffered serious losses and the U-boat commanders called this period the 'Happy Time'

At the end of October the sister ship of the *Graf Spee*, *Admiral Scheer*, began a long raiding voyage. She attacked a convoy that was bravely defended by its ocean escort, the armed merchant cruiser *Jervis Bay*, and losses were limited to six ships, plus *Jervis Bay*. *Scheer* was at sea until March 1941 sinking another 11 ships. Other German surface ships at sea in early 1941 were the cruiser *Admiral Hipper* and the battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*. The latter pair was at sea from January to March 1941 and had some success against individual ships although they were driven off from convoys by British battleships specially allocated for the purpose.

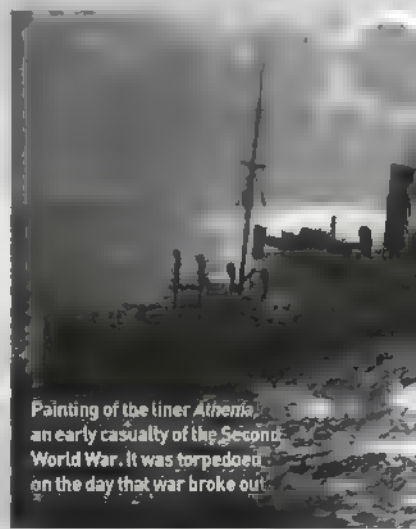
It was against this background of both the surface and submarine

threat to shipping that on 6 March Churchill declared that a Battle of the Atlantic had now succeeded the Battle of Britain. No sooner had the 'battle' been declared than the tide began to turn. British codebreakers began to read the signals to and from U-boats, which allowed convoys to be routed away from potential attackers.

Greater availability of escorts, in large part thanks to the Canadians, allowed convoys to be given an anti-submarine escort throughout their passage; previously this had only been available in the Western Approaches. By the autumn the Americans, although not yet in the war, were also providing convoy escorts in the western Atlantic. By November the U-boats had effectively been defeated and were diverted to defend Norway and help the Italians in the Mediterranean.

## Mission aborted

The surface threat had been dealt with as well. In May 1941 the most powerful German battleship yet, *Bismarck*, entered the Atlantic with the cruiser *Prinz Eugen*. The aim was to annihilate convoys with *Bismarck* engaging any battleship escort and *Prinz Eugen* clearing up the merchant ships. The German



Painting of the liner *Athenia*, an early casualty of the Second World War. It was torpedoed on the day that war broke out

HULTON ARCHIVE GETTY IMAGES

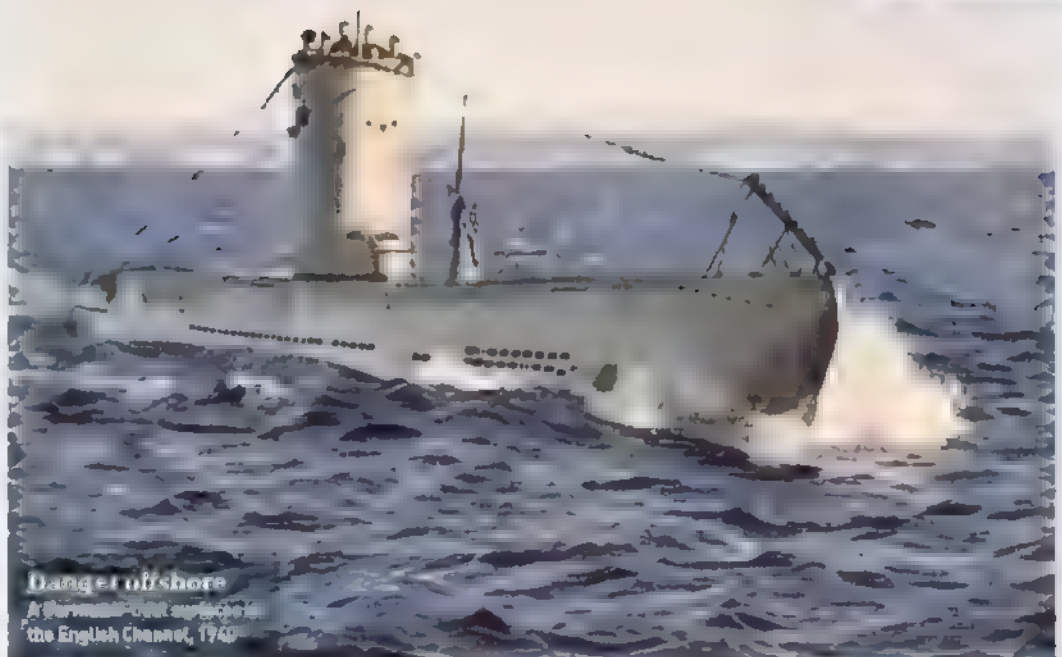


group was intercepted by the battlecruiser *Hood* and battleship *Prince of Wales*. In the ensuing action *Hood* blew up with the loss of all but three of her crew, but *Prince of Wales* scored hits on *Bismarck* which caused the mission to be aborted. *Prinz Eugen* got back to port but *Bismarck* was hit by British torpedo bombers from the carrier *Ark Royal* and battered into a wreck by the battleships *King George V* and *Rodney*. Never again would a large German surface ship penetrate into the Atlantic.

In June 1941 *Graf Spee*'s other sister *Lutzow* (the former *Deutschland*) was torpedoed by British aircraft before she began her planned breakout. In November when Admiral Scheer planned a similar move there were insufficient British ships to guard the passages around Iceland. The Denmark Strait, through which German ships usually transited, was guarded by an American task group based around two battleships. An interesting confrontation was avoided by Admiral Scheer having to abort the mission because of engine trouble

## Enter America

With Churchill's 1941 Battle of the Atlantic effectively won, America's actual entry into the war in December 1941 led, paradoxically, to disaster for the Allies in the Atlantic. German U-boats massacred the merchant ships sailing up and down the east coast of the United States unescorted and silhouetted by the lights of cities. This was the second 'Happy Time'. Only belatedly were convoys organised and as they spread down the seaboard of the Americas, the U-Boats chased



independent shipping further south. Only when a complete convoy system was organised in the western hemisphere was this offensive finally blunted.

In July 1942 the Germans turned their now much larger submarine force to attack the convoy system at what was now its weakest point: the mid-Atlantic, beyond the reach of air cover. There now began a grinding battle of attrition with heavy losses on both sides. Avoiding wolf-packs had become more difficult as the British had lost their ability to read the German code. This was recovered in December 1942. There were now so many U-boats at sea, however, that avoiding the packs became increasingly difficult. The main utility of special intelligence swung toward the reinforcement of convoys found to be especially at risk. Their protection could be

reinforced by extra support groups of surface ships but the major problem remained the unavailability of aircraft in the mid-Atlantic 'black hole'. There always seemed to be other priorities for both the specially built escort aircraft carriers and the long range aircraft, the lack of which remained a crucial chink in the convoys' defences.

March 1943 was a particularly difficult month with some 71 ships being sunk in and around convoys. Almost a quarter of the shipping that tried to cross the Atlantic in the first three weeks of the month was sunk. But the tide was turning once more. Very long-range Liberator aircraft began to arrive in much greater numbers and some support groups were equipped with escort carriers. By May there were no more gaps in air cover and 41 U-boats were sunk. The Germans had to

admit defeat and on the 24th the U-boats were withdrawn from the north Atlantic.

## Last effort

Equipped with homing torpedoes to deal with the escorts and heavier anti-aircraft armament, the U-boats tried again to attack Atlantic convoys in September. The submarines smashed themselves to defeat against a now mature system of surface and air escorts. Until the end of the war the German submarines were reduced to cat and mouse games around the British Isles where they remained a nuisance but not a real threat.

Although it is often said that the battle to bring merchant shipping across the Atlantic was a major priority for Churchill and the Allied leadership, the record does not bear this out. Sure enough, the Germans suffered a decided defeat in 1941 but in 1942 and into 1943 the defence of Allied shipping was for too long not the major priority for suitable assets. Nevertheless, the increasingly well-equipped and organised Allied forces were able to prevent the German navy interfering both with the supplies necessary to keep Britain in the war and the ability of the United States to project its massive power across the Atlantic into western Europe. It was only because of the second decisive victory over the German navy in the Battle of the Atlantic in 1943 that the Allies were able to mount the massive invasion of western Europe over the Normandy beaches the following year.

Survivors from *Athenia* being helped to safety



time he had scrupulously obeyed his standing orders to avoid action with British warships. The commander of the German navy, Admiral Raeder, had studied the operations of German mercantile raiders in the previous war and correctly diagnosed their mistakes in engaging Allied warships. Raiders could only survive by avoiding trouble. Far from home in the south Atlantic

Langsdorff announced that he would disobey these orders and seek action in order to score a notable German success. The admiral after whom his ship was named had just such a success in 1914, when he inflicted a heavy defeat on the Royal Navy at the battle of Coronel, fought off the coast of Chile.

On 2 December *Graf Spee* sank the cargo liner *Doric Star* followed by the *Tairoa* the following day. Then, in a final meeting with *Altmark*, most of the officer prisoners were transferred to the *Graf Spee*, the other sailors being left in terrible conditions in the tanker. On 7 December *Graf Spee* sank the *Streonsalsh*, capturing useful papers revealing British shipping movements and demonstrating the potentially rich pickings to be obtained off Uruguay's Rio de la Plata (River Plate). Langsdorff's appetite was also whetted by a message from Germany reporting a convoy expected off the estuary with a suitably weak escort. So he moved to these busy shipping lanes – and his doom.

Commodore Henry Harwood was one of the finest and most experienced cruiser commanders in the Royal Navy. He had led the South America Division for some time and understood the region very well indeed. In one of the most inspired pieces of guesswork in naval history he ordered a concentration of his available units, the light cruisers *Ajax* and *Achilles* and the heavy cruiser *Exeter*, off the Plate on



**Better days**  
The German pocket battleship  
*Graf Spee* steams ahead,  
a year before it met its end

10 December. Three days later *Graf Spee* came into sight.

Langsdorff could have got away, but mistaking the strength of the opposition, he closed in. He intended to destroy the larger warship first but his attack was decisively weakened by half his main armament breaking down and being out of action for a few crucial minutes. He might have sunk *Exeter* otherwise, as *Graf Spee* found the range with her third salvo.

Eventually, the British heavy cruiser was seriously hit on the turret just forward of the bridge and was apparently disabled. Harwood was deploying his light cruisers as a

separate division to divide *Graf Spee*'s attention and fire. The weight of 6-inch fire being delivered by the 16 guns of *Ajax* and *Achilles* forced Langsdorff to switch his main armament to them. Then the threat of torpedo attack from *Exeter* and its continued accurate fire forced him to return to the heavy cruiser. *Exeter* was heavily damaged by more hits, disabled as a fighting unit and forced out of the action. Harwood

***Graf Spee* captured useful papers revealing British shipping movements**





Hans Langsdorff  
a keen sense of  
honour and of humour

# How Langsdorff's luck ran out

Hans Langsdorff and the *Graf Spee* caused chaos on British sea routes in the Atlantic, but on 13 December 1939 three factors combined to end their run of luck

## 1 He underestimated the enemy's strength

Firstly Langsdorff thought, mistakenly, that he was only facing a light cruiser and two destroyers, rather than a heavy cruiser and two light cruisers. He was misled by the shape of *Exeter's* two funnels, reminiscent of an old 'C' or 'D' class ship, and the single funnels of *Ajax* and *Achilles*, recalling the single funnel of the latest British destroyers. He therefore considered it safe to engage what seemed an inferior force instead of using the superior responsiveness of *Graf Spee's* diesel engines to speed away.



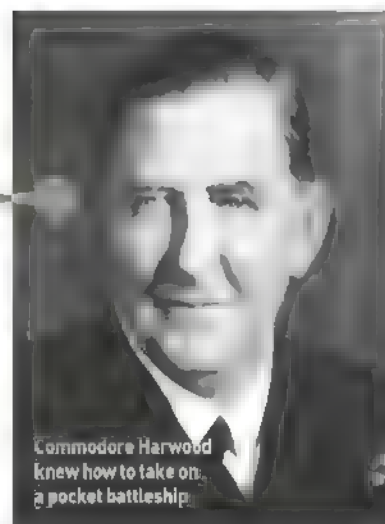
Naval officers examine HMS *Exeter's* damaged forward stack, 1940

## 2 He overestimated his ship's capabilities

Langsdorff was in a ship that was far from being as powerful as she was vaunted. *Graf Spee* had a strong main armament for a ship of her size, six 11-inch guns, but these could only be directed at one target at a time. Those in another direction would be disturbed only by her secondary armament of 5.9-inch guns in relatively easily neutralised open mountings. The designers of the pocket battleships had also been forced to skimp on hull armour. The Germans were shocked to find that *Exeter's* 8-inch shells could penetrate *Graf Spee's* main armour belt. *Graf Spee's* diesel engines vibrated so much that half of her main armament was disabled when a vital screw fell out. Her hull design, built for the Baltic and North Sea, could not take damage and still retain seaworthiness in Atlantic conditions without repair.

## 3 He faced a master tactician

Brilliantly, Commodore Henry Harwood exploited these weaknesses to achieve victory. He was the Royal Navy's leading expert in how to engage a pocket battleship, having been at the cutting edge of the development of a pre-war doctrine on how to deal with such ships. He was the worst adversary Langsdorff could possibly have met.



Commodore Harwood  
knew how to take on  
a pocket battleship

ordered her to the Falklands to undergo repairs.

*Graf Spee* was given no respite from the two light cruisers, which continued to pepper the larger ship with hits as they chased her westward. *Ajax's* Fairey Seafox spotter aircraft assisted British fire control (after some initial problems). *Graf Spee* struck back, disabling *Ajax's* after turrets, and Harwood decided to break off the action. But Langsdorff continued towards the Plate, shadowed by the two British cruisers. His ship's seaworthiness had been compromised by a hole in the forecastle. Significant damage had also been inflicted on the

galley and fuel system as well as to the fire control equipment. Langsdorff himself had been wounded. He decided to put into Montevideo for repairs, something he would bitterly regret.

He could hardly have picked a worse refuge. The Uruguayan capital was M16's main South American station and British influence was considerable. The senior British diplomat Eugen Millington-Drake was an ebullient and effective figure, ably assisted by the naval attaché from Buenos Aires, Captain Henry McCall, and the M16 station chief, Rex Miller. At first they tried to get *Graf Spee* ordered to sea but Harwood soon made it clear that she

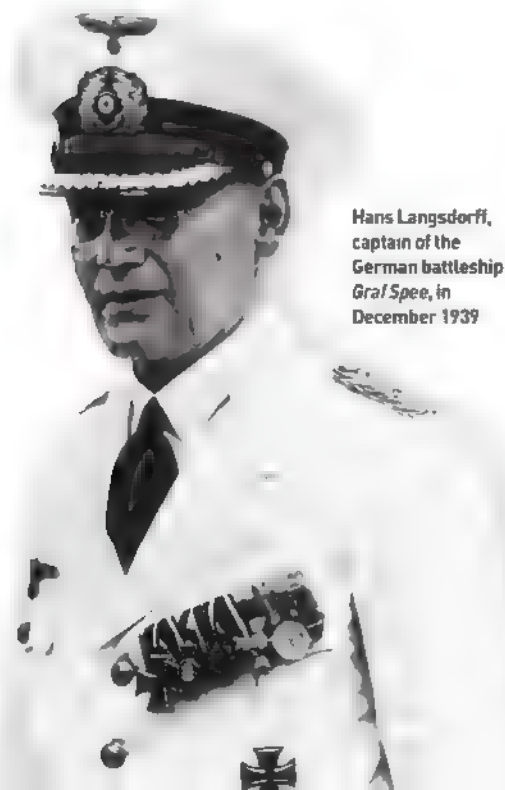
should remain as long as possible so that Allied reinforcements could arrive. *Exeter* was replaced by HMS *Cumberland*, which had steamed post-haste from Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands, but it would take capital ships, those with high-calibre guns, to be certain of dealing with the pocket battleship. The carrier *Ark Royal* and battle cruiser *Renown* were some days away.

British merchant ships were sailed out of Montevideo in order to delay *Graf Spee* under the 24-hour rule. This international law stated that a belligerent warship could not leave a neutral port less than 24 hours after



Exeter is welcomed home to Plymouth in 1940 after her encounter with *Graf Spee*

## Captain Langsdorff decided on a personal sacrifice to atone for his mistakes



Hans Langsdorff, captain of the German battleship *Graf Spee*, in December 1939

a merchant ship of the opposing side. Meanwhile a British deception operation convinced the Germans that heavy warships were already in place. The Uruguayans became frustrated with both sides but the more threatening German attitude led them to side eventually with the British and accede to the request to allow *Graf Spee* to remain beyond the time that Montevideo had originally set for the pocket battleship's departure.

This decision was overtaken by events, because the hard-pressed Langsdorff had already decided to scuttle his ship. On Sunday 17 December, *Graf Spee* began to disembark her crew. That evening, watched by huge crowds and reported live on radio, she sailed out of Montevideo – and stopped. Charges had been laid and these were exploded after her captain and the last of *Graf Spee*'s crew left the ship. The forward charges failed to go off but the after and midships explosions were enough to destroy the pocket battleship.

Langsdorff had decided that his ship's company should not pay the price of his disobedience in deliberately engaging British warships. Convinced by British deception that he was facing certain destruction, he chose to emulate the self immolation of the

High Sea Fleet which had been scuttled at Scapa Flow in 1919 on the order of the German officer in command.

Scuttling vessels carried no stigma in the German navy. Langsdorff, however, not the most typical of *Kriegsmarine* officers, felt the situation keenly. He decided on a personal sacrifice to atone for his mistakes, but felt unable to go down with his ship because of the need to arrange the safe internment of his men on the other side of the Plate in Argentina. As soon as that task had been accomplished, he placed a German ensign, probably one of the flags flown by *Graf Spee* as she left Montevideo, on the bed in his hotel room. He lay down, took a pistol and fired at his head – and missed. The second shot struck home. An honourable and brave man had shared the fate of his ship. **II**

**Eric Grove** is an independent naval historian and international strategic analyst, and former professor of naval history and fellow in security studies at Liverpool Hope University

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#### Book

► **The Price of Disobedience: The Battle of the River Plate Reconsidered** by Eric Grove (Sutton, 2002)



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# Bomber Boys

Britain's bombing campaign in Germany still arouses controversy. **Patrick Bishop** explains why this was a case of good men being asked to do a very ugly job

**O**N THE MORNING of Sunday 31 May 1942, Britain woke up to some grimly satisfying news. The previous night a thousand bombers had flown to Cologne and dropped nearly 1,500 tons of bombs on the city, killing up to 486 people.

The newspapers could barely contain their glee. "The Vengeance Begins!" shouted the *Daily Express*.

"The ruins of Cologne are hidden under a pall of smoke rising 15,000 feet after the first thousand bomber raid in history." It reported one pilot as saying that the skies over Cologne had been "as busy as Piccadilly circus". The triumphant tone of the *Express* chimed with the mood of its readers. Bombing Germany had the almost unanimous support of the population. Britons prided themselves on their phlegmatic character and sense of fair play. But the

experience of the Blitz in the winter had changed all that. Some 40,000 people had been killed and hundreds of acres of London and other important cities laid waste.

Whatever reluctance the public might have felt to retaliate disappeared with the Luftwaffe raid on Coventry on the night of 14 November 1940. It was the most concentrated attack of the Blitz. About 560 people were killed and more than half the homes in the city

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AKO IMAGES





Setting off, 1943: crews of Halifax aircraft, one of the main bombers used in the

## Allied strategy: Winning by air power

BRITAIN HAD BEEN wedded to the notion of strategic bombing since the end of the First World War. Strategic thinkers soon created a conventional wisdom that held that the next war would be won by the country with the heaviest air power. Giant air fleets would lay waste the war industry of the enemy in its own territory, crippling its ability to fight, so the theory ran. The doctrine fitted Britain's circumstances, as an island that could not attack its foes by land. Germany, by contrast, never invested in heavy bombers, using the Luftwaffe as an adjunct to Blitzkrieg, blasting a path from the air for its invading armies.

Technological shortcomings, particularly in navigation, meant that the ambition of devastating the factories and power sources of the Nazi war machine proved very hard to achieve. Increasingly the towns that they were housed in became the targets. By the end of the war, the 70 major German towns that had been attacked had suffered at least 45 per cent destruction of their built-up areas. The campaign only started to have a decisive effect on war industry towards the end of the conflict. Nor did it bring about the predicted collapse of civilian morale. Nonetheless Bomber Command's efforts were a vital part of Allied grand strategy.

From 1942 intensive operations forced German High Command to concentrate on the air defence of Germany and give up hope that they could rebuild their bomber fleet and launch a new blitz on Britain. The priority given to defending the Reich meant that outside it, the Allies eventually achieved air superiority. Without that, the campaigns in Africa and Italy could not have succeeded and the D-Day landings would have been impossible. It also meant that on the eastern front, the German army was deprived of the air support to which it had been accustomed.

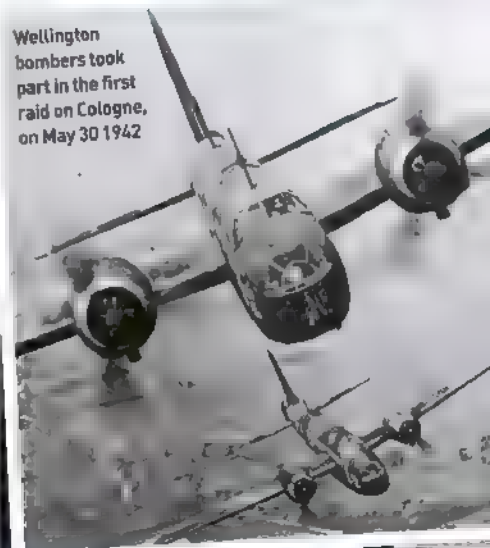
destroyed or damaged. Coventry was full of war industry factories and therefore a legitimate target by Britain's own rules of war. Nonetheless the scale and the brutality of the violence swept away any sentiment for restraint. Before the raid, semi-official surveys of what was being said in the pubs and cafes of Coventry recorded that people were not in favour of taking the war to Germany, for fear of what might be done in reprisal. Afterwards the mood shifted decisively. A report by the pioneering social study group Mass Observation noted one young man as saying, "we're fighting gangsters so we've got to be gangsters ourselves. We've been gentlemen too long".

After Coventry, the gloves came off and stayed off. The slow but relentless escalation of the RAF campaign took place against a background of general approval. George Orwell's famously tender conscience was untroubled by the 'thousand' raid on Cologne. The Germans, he declared, in a radio broadcast a few days afterwards, deserved no quarter. "In 1940, when the Germans were bombing Britain, they did not expect retaliation on a very heavy scale," he said. "[They] were not afraid to boast in their propaganda about the slaughter of civilians which they were bringing about and the terror which their raids aroused. Now, when the tables are turned, they are beginning to cry out against the whole business of aerial bombing... The people of this country are not revengeful, but they remember what happened to themselves two years ago, and they remember how the Germans talked when they thought themselves safe from retaliation."

### Payback time

By the middle of 1943, Britain had more than paid back Germany for what it had done. There was, however, no question of easing up and bombing continued with ever increasing fury until the

Wellington bombers took part in the first raid on Cologne, on May 30 1942



Coventry Cathedral in November 1940 after a German bombing raid

last days of the war. There were several reasons why the campaign remained at the centre of the British war effort.

Its initial importance was as much political as military. It was the only means the government had of hitting Germany on its own territory. The sight of the bombers overhead cheered the Home Front and showed the world that someone was prepared to stand up to Hitler.

The effect of the raids were far from impressive however. Before the war extravagant claims had been made by air power theorists for the might of the bomber. In practice Bomber Command sustained terrible losses in the early days without anything like commensurate results. In the first two years of the war it lost 4,823 men and 2,331 aircraft on operations. In that time it dropped only 35,194 tons of bombs. That was 2,000 tons less than it dropped in the single month of May 1944. Despite the great effort, the resulting destruction was often small and the casualties minimal. A typical night's work was that of 29/30 August 1941. More than 140 aircraft were sent to attack railways and harbours in Frankfurt. They reached their target successfully and began bombing. They managed to do some damage to a gasworks, a barrel warehouse and a few houses and to kill eight people. In the course of the operation seven aircraft and the lives of 16 of the crew were lost.

The crews' main problem was finding the target. Navigation aids were primitive. In bad weather, bombs were sometimes dropped on the wrong

towns or on decoy fires lit in open countryside. The arrival of radio and radar directional devices, like Gee, Oboe and H2S were a great help in getting aircraft to the right place. The development of tactics using Pathfinder crews to mark the point of attack with colour coded flares and bombs significantly improved precision. As the big four-engined bombers, the Stirling, Halifax, and above all the Lancaster, came into service the weight of bombs the RAF could drop increased enormously.

### Area attacks

Yet Bomber Command remained a blunt instrument. There were occasional 'rapier thrusts' like the Dams Raid of May 1943 led by Guy Gibson. But most of the work was done with the bludgeon. In the battles of the Ruhr, Hamburg, and Berlin, launched the same year, Bomber Command set out to destroy whole cities through what became known as 'area attacks'. The aim of the raids was to smash the factories and works that powered the German war effort. But given the inability to deliver bombs precisely, this inevitably caused the deaths of huge numbers of civilians. The Hamburg operation alone killed 40,000. By the end of the war the death toll had reached 600,000.

The killing of civilians, though publicly regretted, was thought to have potentially beneficial consequences.

The bomber drops things on people and people don't like things being dropped on them. And the fighter shoots at the bomber who drops things. Therefore he is popular whereas the bomber is unpopular. It's as easy as that

**Sir Arthur Harris** on why the public preferred fighters to bombers



“He was a colossus, up there running the show, like Zeus from Olympus”

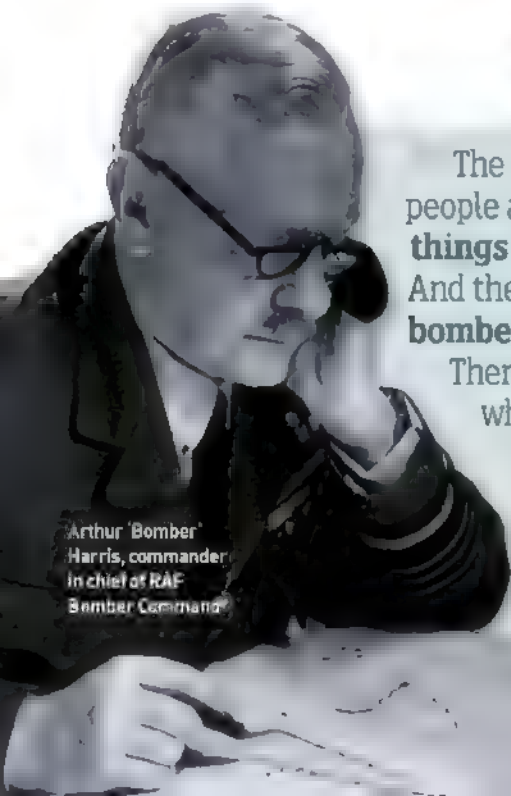
**Tony Iveson** on Bomber Harris

German morale was officially believed to be suspect. Directives named the undermining of civilian morale and particularly that of industrial workers as a primary goal. It was this aspect of the operation that lay at the heart of postwar criticism of the campaign.

In the end some 70 German cities were ruined by Allied bombing. It was Bomber Command's ruthless and energetic chief, Arthur Harris, known as 'Bomber' to the press but as 'Butch' by those who flew for him, who bore the brunt of postwar revulsion at the destruction of Germany. But no matter how enthusiastically and unswervingly he may have pursued the policy, the idea of pulverising cities had not originated with him.

As he pointed out in his memoirs: "There is a widespread impression that I not only invented the policy of area bombing but also insisted on carrying it out in the face of a natural reluctance to kill women and children that was felt by everyone else. The facts are otherwise. Such decisions are not in any case made by commanders-in-chief in the field, but by the ministries, the Chiefs of Staff Committee and by the war cabinet. The decision to attack large industrial areas was taken long before I became commander-in chief".

Bombed water supply for factories in Nuremberg, 1945. Crippling Germany's war industries was a key aim in Britain's bombing campaign



Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, commander in chief of RAF Bomber Command





|| A German city was always this, this hellish picture of flame, gunfire and searchlights, an unreal picture because we could not hear it or feel its breath. Sometimes when the smoke rolled back and we saw streets and buildings I felt startled. Perhaps if we had seen the white, upturned faces of people, as over England we sometimes did, our hearts would have rebelled ||

**Don Charlwood**, navigator, on the experience of bombing

This was true. For much of the war, Harris's boss, the chief of the Air Staff, Sir Charles Portal, was a vigorous advocate of the policy. But towards the end he veered away from area bombing in favour of more precise attacks and afterwards succeeded, as did Churchill, in distancing himself from the controversy. Long before the conflict was over it was clear that there would be trouble. Inside Britain deep misgivings had been voiced by politicians and churchmen while the battle was still raging. The loudest dissenting voice in parliament belonged to Dick Stokes, the

Labour member for Ipswich, who challenged both the utility and the morality of the campaign.

Very few Britons shared his misgivings. The Bomber Boys were very popular. They were bringing the war to Germany and dying in huge numbers in the process. The attitude of the country was summed up in a poem by Noel Coward.

*Lie in the dark and listen  
It's clear tonight so they're flying high  
Hundreds of them, thousands perhaps,  
Riding the icy, moonlit sky.  
Men, material, bombs and maps,*



*Altimeters and guns and charts,  
Coffee, sandwiches, fleece-lined boots  
Bones and muscles and minds and hearts  
English saplings with English roots  
Deep in the earth they've left below,  
Lie in the dark and let them go,  
Lie in the dark and listen.*

But when the war ended Bomber Command's activities became an embarrassment. Germany was to be an important ally in the Cold War and despite the huge sacrifice they had made, praise for the crews was lukewarm or non-existent. Churchill barely mentioned the bombing campaign in his victory speech. Hugo Sperrle, commander of German Air Fleet Three, was not charged at the Nuremberg trials with war crimes relating to the Blitz, for fear of drawing attention to the damage done to German cities.

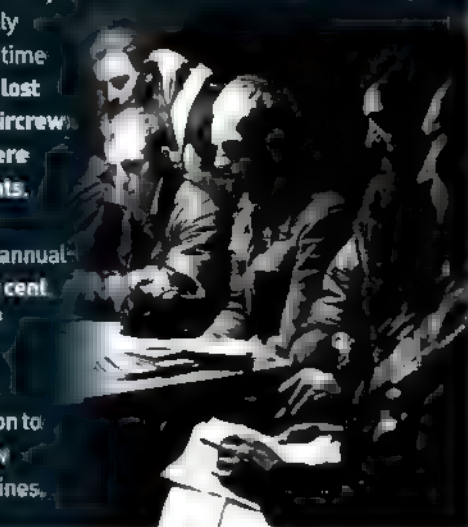
In Britain, the bomber crews received nothing like the postwar honour and praise that was showered on the pilots of the Battle of Britain. They even became the targets of the satire of the irreverent young men of the *Beyond the Fringe* review of the early 1960s. It is forgotten now that the 'Perkins' who is told to make "a futile gesture to raise the whole tone of the war" is a bomber pilot.

The survivors kept their hurt and resentment to themselves but occasionally behind closed doors they let it show. A speech by marshal of the Royal Air Force, Sir William Dickson, at Five Group's first postwar reunion, 30 years after the war ended, gives an idea of their sense of hurt. Dickson, who had served on the Joint Planning Committee, asked why it had taken

## Aerial bombardment: Danger for all

Britain's Bomber Command mounted operations virtually from the first day of the war to the last, halting only because of bad weather. In that time they flew 366,514 sorties, and lost 8,325 aircraft. Of the 125,000 aircrew who passed through, 55,220 were killed, 8,090 of them in accidents. In the last full year of the war bombing caused a reduction of annual industrial production of 17 per cent. Altogether about 20 per cent of Germany's housing stock was destroyed and 600,000 people, mostly civilians, died. In addition to aerial bombardment it also flew regular missions to drop sea mines.

Stirling aircrew debrief after a bombing mission over Berlin, 1943



## Utter destruction

This shot of Cologne in 1945 shows the extent of bomb damage to military targets and civilian buildings alike



so long to arrange the gathering. He believed that "it may... have something to do with a growing resentment and indignation, shared by the whole air force and many outside it, towards some who belittle the strategic air offensive against Germany. Some of these little people try to turn the truth upside down to sell their books or for some vested interest. We particularly resent the argument that the offensive was ineffective and caused needless casualties".

### Iconoclastic history

It was not until the 1960s that the work of Bomber Command began to be properly assessed. It started with the publication in 1961 of an iconoclastic official history by Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, who had served as a bomber navigator. It paid full tribute to the courage of the crews, but made clear that their achievements were limited. The great area offensive, they concluded "did not produce direct results commensurate with the hopes once entertained and at times, indeed, feared by the Germans themselves". Huge areas of many of Germany's great towns had been laid waste "but the will of the German people was not broken or even significantly impaired and the effect on war production was remarkably small".

The claim that the effect on war production was negligible has since been convincingly challenged. But as Dickson said, it was the charge of brutality against the civilian population that rankled most. It resurfaced recently with the publication of the English

translation of Jorg Friedrich's *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany 1940-1945*, which emphasises in detail the suffering that the bombing generated. The brutality charge was never widely accepted in Britain but the reticence about Bomber Command persisted. There is no national memorial to the Bomber Boys, as there is to the pilots of Fighter Command, nor even a place where the names of the 55,000 aircrew who died are listed and honoured.

The pendulum of revisionism has shifted attention away from the crews' great contribution to the defeat of Hitler. Perhaps the greatest was in persuading the Germans of the folly of war and of following dictators, as evidenced by the institutionalised rectitude of the modern nation. It was the Bomber Boys' misfortune to be good men who were asked to do an ugly job. That does not mean it was not necessary. ■

Patrick Bishop is the author of *Battle of Britain: A Day-by-Day Chronicle 10 July-31 Oct* (Quercus, 2009)

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#### Book

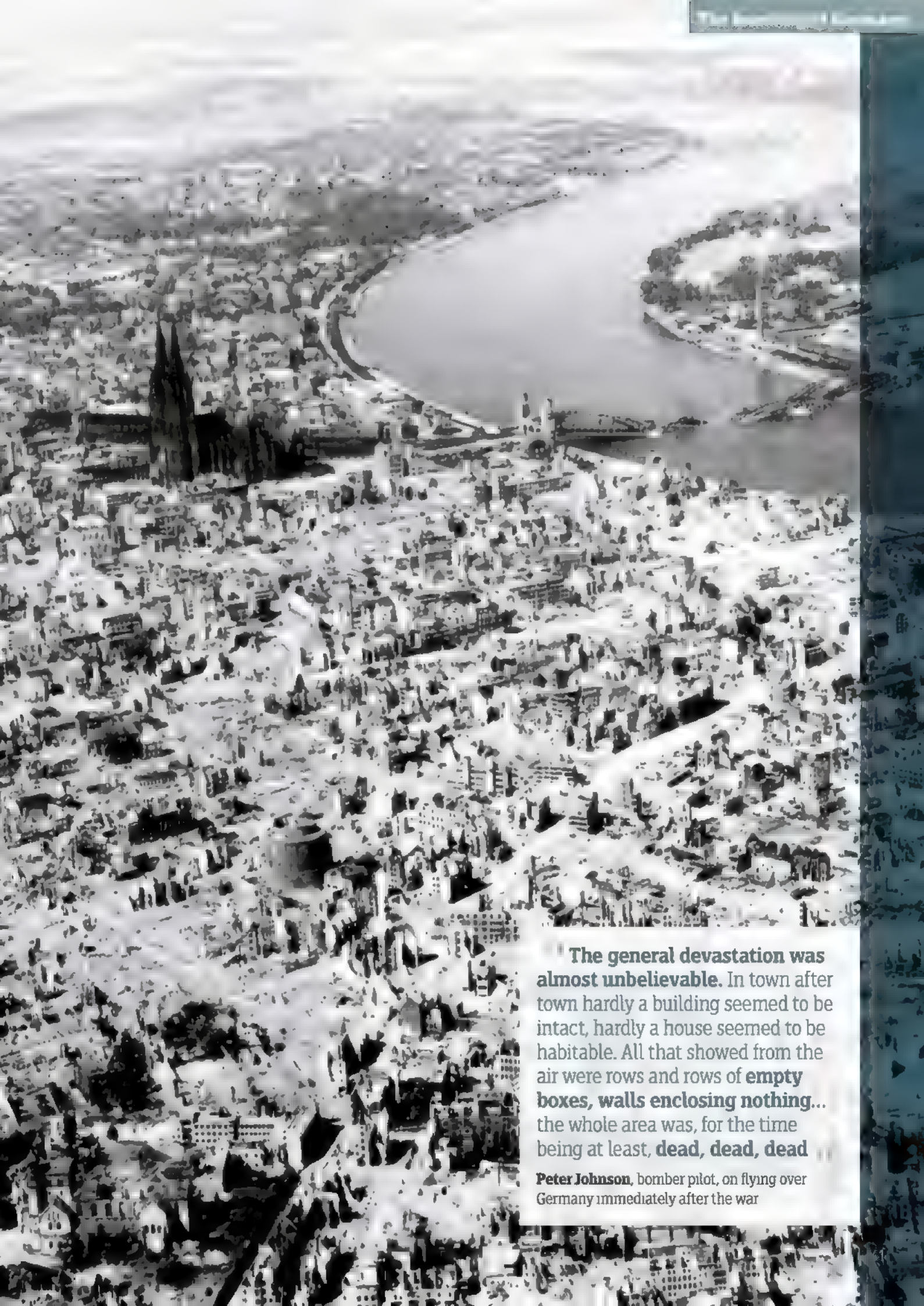
- **Bomber Boys: Fighting Back 1940-45** by Patrick Bishop (Harper Perennial, 2008)
- **The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945** by Jorg Friedrich (Columbia University Press, 2006)

#### Website

Read more about **Allied bombing strategy** on the BBC's history website at [www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/)

**BBC** [wwwtwo.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/01.shtml](http://wwwtwo.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/01.shtml)

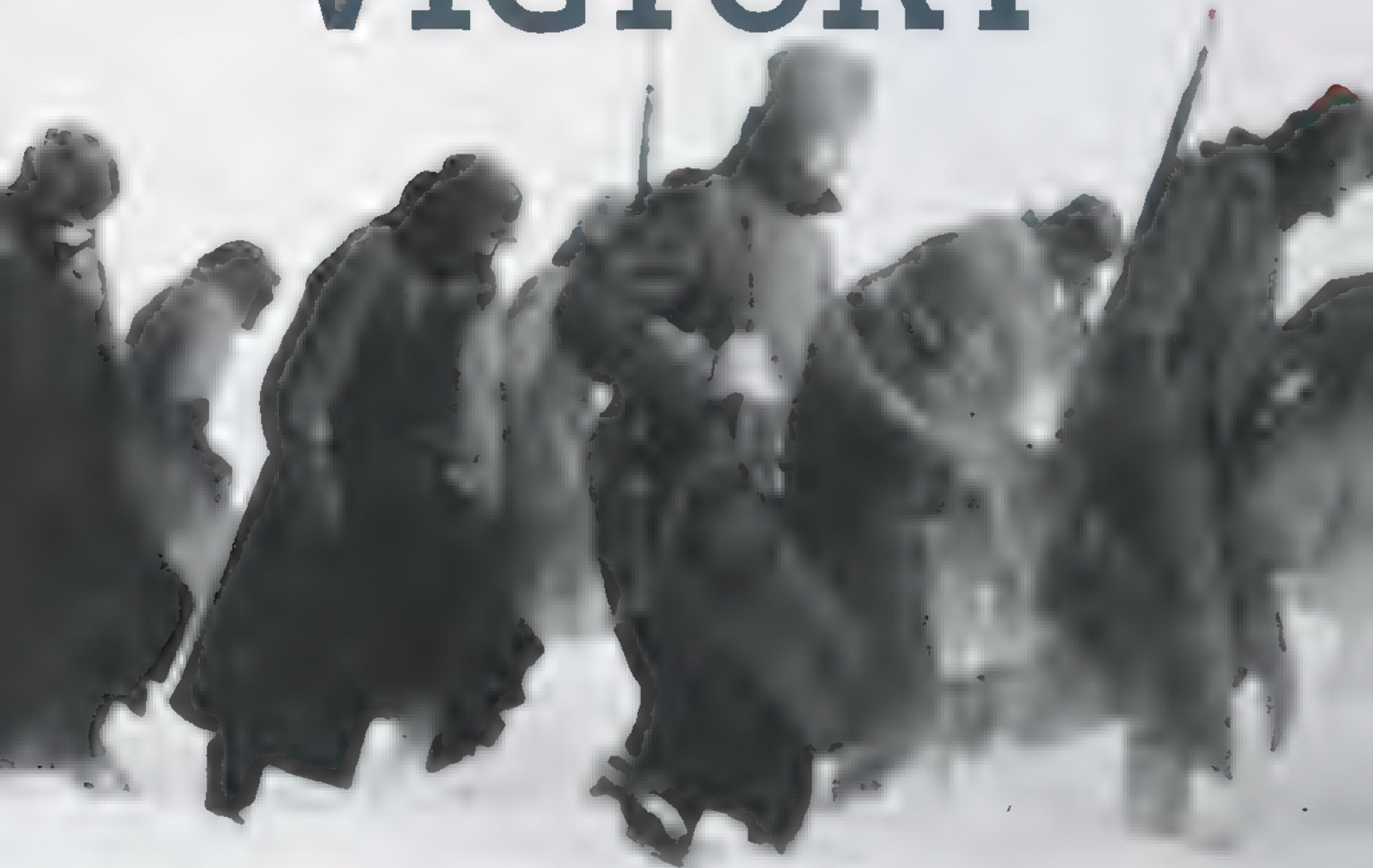




**The general devastation was almost unbelievable.** In town after town hardly a building seemed to be intact, hardly a house seemed to be habitable. All that showed from the air were rows and rows of **empty boxes, walls enclosing nothing...** the whole area was, for the time being at least, **dead, dead, dead**

**Peter Johnson**, bomber pilot, on flying over Germany immediately after the war

# STALIN'S UNLIKELY VICTORY



**O**N THE 24TH ANNIVERSARY of the Bolshevik revolution, the traditional parade took place in Moscow's Red Square. It might very well have been the last. Early in the morning of 7 November 1941 Red Army soldiers and tanks moved through the snow, past St Basil's Cathedral and the Kremlin while German troops stood a few miles from the city, preparing to strike into its heart. Standing atop Lenin's mausoleum Stalin gave a speech that left his compatriots under no illusions about the gravity of the situation.

"Comrades, today we must celebrate the 24th anniversary of the October revolution in difficult conditions. The German brigands' treacherous attack and the war that they forced upon us have created a threat to our country. We have temporarily lost a number of regions, and the enemy is before the gates of Leningrad and Moscow."

The moment of crisis had arrived in the battle to the death between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Over the next few days, weeks and months the future of Europe and the world would be decided. Stalin concluded his speech with a clarion call to his compatriots. "Death to the German

armies of occupation! Long live our glorious motherland, her freedom and her independence! Under the banner of Lenin – onward to victory!"

## **Russia on the run**

At the start of the Second World War, Germany and the USSR were the unlikeliest of friends, having signed a non-aggression pact in August 1939. For Hitler this gave him the freedom he needed to take on Britain and France while Stalin got the time to rebuild his forces, which had been shattered by his recent purges of the army. Still, Professor Chris Bellamy insists, this shaky deal was never destined to last. "A military



When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Hitler's triumph seemed assured. But 18 months later the Red Army had the Wehrmacht on the run. **Professor Chris Bellamy**, author of the definitive account of the eastern front, speaks to **Rob Attar** about one of the most dramatic recoveries in military history

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### Winter warriors

German soldiers at the battle of Stalingrad in late 1942, where the Soviet Union used the harsh weather as a 'weapon of war'

clash between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union was ultimately inevitable and had been so since Hitler came to power. Hitler was obsessed with the Bolshevik menace, as he saw it, and in fact the Nazi party was actually set up to prevent the spread of communism."

On 22 June 1941 Hitler reneged on the pact in ferocious fashion when a force of three million men smashed into the Soviet Union over a vast 1,800-mile front. The initial attacks of Operation Barbarossa were a stunning triumph for Hitler and a devastating blow for Stalin. The Russian forces were caught completely by surprise – incredibly so considering that the

projected invasion had been an open secret for some while. But Stalin, often reputed to be extremely paranoid, had utterly failed to prepare for this moment. "The Russians had plenty of intelligence that the Germans were going to attack them but Stalin just put the lid on it," Bellamy explains. "I think Stalin was in denial. Even if he did believe the reports there was nothing he could do about it because the re-equipment and retraining that was necessary to enable him to meet a German invasion was not complete."

The Wehrmacht scored success after success. Within a month it had advanced 400 miles and captured

several major cities, including Minsk, Smolensk, Vyazma and Kiev. Leningrad was under siege. In desperate attempts to forestall the Germans, the Russian armed forces lost huge numbers of casualties, many of them taken prisoner in giant German encirclements. Some 325,000 were captured at Minsk alone. "It was cataclysmic," says Bellamy. "The amount of damage done by the Germans and the casualties have been likened to a small nuclear attack. In the first six months of the war the Russians lost close to four million people."

From the outset, the Soviet Union appeared to be doomed. "When Operation Barbarossa was launched ➤

the Germans were unquestionably the favourites to win," says Bellamy. "They were supremely well trained and experienced and had not been defeated on land before whereas the Russians were known to have suffered heavily because of the purges. This was, after all, a new regime that had been butchering its own people in large numbers. If you took a modern military establishment and killed off the same proportion of colonels and generals as had happened in Russia from 1937–40 you wouldn't have enough left to run a wheel stall." Most outside observers held out little hope for a Russian fightback, including the British who thought they would be defeated within a few weeks.

By purging his own army and failing to heed the invasion warnings, Stalin himself must take a large amount of the blame for the disaster that befell Russia. In one of his less guarded moments he may have admitted as much, apparently saying to his lieutenants shortly after Barbarossa began: "Lenin left us a great inheritance and we, his heirs, have fucked it up!" It was in the aftermath of Barbarossa that Stalin's own position came under threat, according to Bellamy. "If anyone in the central group of Soviet leaders had had the nerve and wanted to overthrow Stalin at this point then it might have happened. Not only that but there were also really quite serious stirrings among elements of the population. There were large groupings in Ukraine that wanted to see Soviet power overthrown. The Baltic States had only been annexed in 1940 and definitely didn't want to be ruled by the Soviet Union and there were even people who disappeared from their flats in Moscow and camped in the woods, forming potentially guerrilla groups."

Yet in the end no one had the guts to confront Stalin and potential unrest was kept down through the increased activities of the NKVD (secret police). With Moscow imperilled Stalin made



Claus Hansmann's 1941 drawing shows Russian prisoners of war. They were captured in vast numbers at the onset of the conflict

the bold decision to remain in the capital, even as many others fled, and urged a superhuman effort to defend the city.

### Fighting back

The German army crept closer and closer to Moscow in the autumn of 1941 until, by November, some forces had made it to within 20 miles of the city. However the Wehrmacht's advance was becoming ever more difficult. True, the first few months of the war had brought them successive victories but in the process the Russians had inflicted serious casualties on them. It was also growing increasingly difficult to supply such a large army, so far from home. What Bellamy calls "the German logistic bungee" had been stretched too far. These problems were exacerbated immeasurably by the onset of winter, which was an exceptionally cold one, even for Russia. Unlike their foes, the Germans did not have the right

**"The amount of damage done by the Germans and the casualties have been likened to a small nuclear attack."**

equipment for the icy weather. Their guns wouldn't fire properly, tanks ground to a halt and aircraft couldn't fly. Not equipped with winter clothing, German troops suffered terribly from frostbite and some sentries froze to death at their posts. The Wehrmacht's bruising encounter with 'General Winter' could perhaps have been avoided if Operation Barbarossa had been launched in 15 May as had

originally been planned. However the suppression of an uprising in Yugoslavia had put back the invasion plans, losing the Germans 38 precious days in their quest to take Moscow before the snows arrived. It was a delay that would prove fatal.

In early December came the great Soviet counteroffensive. Headed by the inspirational General Georgi Konstantinovich Zhukov, the Russians began to force the enemy to retreat. By March of 1942 the exhausted German army had been driven back over 100 miles in places and, for the first time on land in the European war, Hitler had been defeated. "With the benefit of hindsight the battle for Moscow was the key turning point of the war," says Bellamy. "However at the time nobody knew whether the Soviet success in the counteroffensive at Moscow would last".

In spring 1942, the German army was still camped deep in the Soviet Union, Leningrad remained under siege and the Russians had no time to recover from the previous year's exertions. "Having survived an incredible military catastrophe in 1941, Russia very nearly collapsed in shock in 1942," Bellamy explains. He believes it only continued to function through a combination of the NKVD's tight control and economic aid provided by the western allies, which may not have been huge "but was just enough to stave off Soviet collapse".

On 28 June Hitler made his second attempt to destroy the Soviet Union. Operation Blau saw the German Army Group South drive far into southern Russia hoping to crush the Russian army and take the invaluable Caucasus oilfields. As in the previous year the Wehrmacht raced forward, capturing large swathes of territory. However, Hitler then made a major error. He opted to split the Army Group into two parts; one would attempt to seize the oilfields while the other would overwhelm the city of Stalingrad on the river Volga. Neither target would be achieved. At the most crucial moment,

ALAMY

## Timeline: The eastern front

### 23 August 1939

Foreign ministers Vyacheslav Molotov and Joachim von Ribbentrop stun the world by signing a non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany

Stalin and Ribbentrop watch as Molotov signs the non-aggression pact on 23 August



### 22 June 1941

Germany launches Operation Barbarossa, a full-scale invasion of the Soviet Union that makes rapid inroads into the USSR. Russian casualties are horrendous

### 31 August 1941

The first Arctic convoy from Britain arrives in Archangel with military supplies. British and American aid will play a vital role in supporting the Russian war effort







**Barbarossa** Russian tanks head to the front line on 22 June 1941, the day of the German invasion



### Turning the tables

Russian troops set their sights on the enemy during the pivotal battle of Stalingrad in January 1943



A 1941 poster urging Russian victory over the 'Fascist beast'

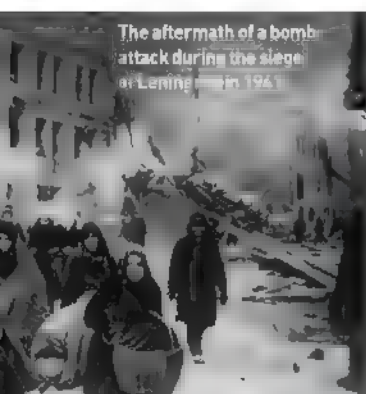
the Nazi leader had begun to dither. "The British military have a principle: selection and maintenance of the aim. The German aim was not maintained at all," says Bellamy. "Was it Moscow, was it Leningrad, was it the oilfields, was it Stalingrad? Hitler was constantly flipping between objectives. Trying to invade Stalingrad was not even a good idea. It is obvious why Hitler wanted to capture it, the city that bore the name of the boss, but although it was an industrial centre it was not a particularly important objective. If his aim was to get the Caucasus oilfields he should have concentrated on that rather than diverting forces to get Stalingrad".

### Slow defeat

The push into the Caucasus slowed to a halt in September as the Germans lacked the supplies or manpower to decisively defeat the Russians in their path. So the world's attention turned to the titanic struggle in progress for the city of Stalingrad. It was, according to Bellamy, "the last chance Germany had of defeating the Soviet Union". By August German troops were penetrating the city's suburbs but failed to secure the city in its entirety. The following month, forces commanded by Friedrich Paulus made it into the centre of the city and engaged in brutal fighting among rubble that had been created by Luftwaffe bombing. In October the Russians found themselves

with their backs to the Volga, with just a toehold in the city. Still the Germans were not having it all their own way. The supply problems of 1941 had returned in earnest and winter was again approaching. As with the battle for Moscow, the Russians were far better prepared to deal with the harsh conditions than their enemy, and they knew it. The best meteorologists in the Soviet Union were employed to predict changes in the weather so that – for example – at Stalingrad the major counteroffensive was launched just as the snow began to fall. Bellamy goes so far as to say that "undoubtedly the Russian planners were using weather as a weapon of war".

While the tenacious Russian defenders continued to cling on inside the city, Zhukov was masterminding a brilliant strategic coup that would turn the tables. He built up his forces behind the lines and then on 19 November surged forwards from the north and the south in a pincer movement that trapped 250,000 troops inside Stalingrad. Unable to bear the thought of giving up on his prize, Hitler refused to allow a breakout and there was soon no escape. "This was not just an encirclement but a double encirclement in the best classical tradition. It mirrored the battle of Cannae [Hannibal's defeat of the Romans in the Second Punic War] in 216 BC," says Bellamy. When Paulus finally



The aftermath of a bomb attack during the siege of Leningrad in 1941

### 8 September 1941

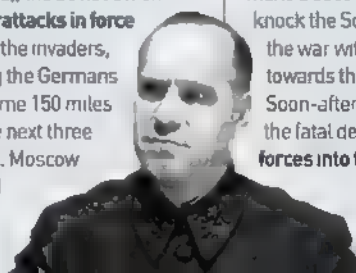
Having already captured Minsk and Smolensk, Hitler decides to **besiege** the northern city of Leningrad, leaving 2.5 million citizens facing starvation

### 2 October 1941

**Operation Typhoon**, the German drive towards Moscow, begins. By November some sections of the Wehrmacht will be a mere 20 miles from the Kremlin

### 6 December 1941

Headed by **General Zhukov** (pictured), the Soviet Union **counterattacks in force** against the invaders, pushing the Germans back some 150 miles over the next three months. Moscow is saved



### 28 June 1942

**Operation Blau** sees Germany make a second attempt to knock the Soviet Union out of the war with a powerful push towards the Caucasus. Soon after Hitler will make the fatal decision to **split his forces into two**

surrendered on 31 January 1943, less than 100,000 men still survived. Over the course of the battle the Axis had lost 800,000 men and although the Russian casualties were actually a bit higher, thanks to their huge reserves of manpower they could replenish their losses. The Germans could not.

### Why the war was won

After Stalingrad the war in the east still had over two years to go, but the result was no longer in doubt. From then on only the Germans could lose, although both sides would continue to suffer many casualties until the very end.

Germany had sunk from the euphoria of the start of Barbarossa to the dark despair at Stalingrad in only a year and a half. How had Russia managed to achieve such an incredible turnaround? Here the contrasting roles of the two leaders must come under scrutiny. Stalin had clearly failed early on but crucially he was prepared to learn from his mistakes and, according to Bellamy, "showed himself to be a very effective war leader". Hitler by contrast "started to lose it" when dealing with the complications of taking on an enemy of the size of the Soviet Union.

Not only did he fail to maintain his objectives but he continued to intervene in military decision-making, to the detriment of his army's performance. Stalin by contrast "gained greater trust in his senior military commanders" and allowed his generals enough freedom to get the job done. He was also fortunate to have some talented military brains working under him. "Soviet generalship was very good," Bellamy explains. "A lot is made of Zhukov but Konstantin Rokossovsky was actually the most tactically deft. He was involved in every battle and played a major role in the clashes at Moscow and Stalingrad." (See page 54 for how Zhukov



Rokossovsky: a brilliant Russian general

### 23 August 1942

A massive Luftwaffe bombing raid takes place on Stalingrad, while on the ground German troops enter the city's suburbs. Hitler believes the Russians are 'all but finished'

### 19 November 1942

A huge Russian counter-offensive begins at Stalingrad and within four days 250,000 German soldiers are trapped in the city. Hitler refuses to allow his men to fight their way out

### 31 January 1943

The German Sixth Army surrenders in Stalingrad. Axis losses are close to a million and Germany has reached the furthest extent of its advance into Russia. The tide has turned



Defeat in the ice German soldiers covered in snow in March 1944 on the Eastern Front

compared to the other leading generals in the Second World War).

Another advantage Stalin possessed was the sheer size of the Soviet Union, with all that entailed in terms of population and resources. The Russians suffered around eight and a half million irrecoverable battlefield losses over the

Soviet Union during the war," Bellamy says. "An American evacuated there recounted how the town itself was small, quiet and drab but that a few miles outside there was a city called 'nameless' which was just a gigantic spread of factories producing aircraft and other things".

## "Without the totalitarian nature of Stalin's regime the Soviet Union could not have won the war"

course of the war, compared to around four million Germans. Even when they were winning, they were losing more men than their enemy but their losses could be borne with much greater ease. The Germans were also often hamstrung by supply problems whereas on the other side Russian industrial production played a major part in keeping the country in the fight.

Before the war, a lot of Russian industry had started to be shifted east out of harm's way, where it could churn out guns and tanks in massive quantities. "One of the most amazing stories about this is that of Kuybyshev, which was the reserve capital of the

A further weapon that Stalin utilised very effectively was nationalism, something that had formerly been an alien concept in the multinational Soviet Union. "Stalin's use of innate Russian patriotism was masterly," explains Bellamy. "At the start of the war he appealed to the Russian people using old fashioned Russian nationalistic and patriotic images and then after Stalingrad they brought back the imperial Russian styles in uniform – which would have been unthinkable before. The army that went from Stalingrad to Berlin was not wearing the rather dowdy insignia of the communist forces but the gold shoulder boards inherited from the tsars."



German POWs after the comprehensive defeat at Stalingrad in 1943



In aiming to unite the people in this way, Stalin was helped by Nazi Germany's violent repression of the people it occupied. "When the Germans arrived in Ukraine and the Baltic states many of the people welcomed them as liberators; however the treatment of people in these territories turned them against the invaders. Had the Germans managed things more shrewdly I don't think the pro-Soviet partisan movements would have gained so much strength," says Bellamy. The Nazis made it abundantly clear how they viewed the people of the Soviet Union, which only damaged their cause.

### Out of the frying pan?

Of course the Bolsheviks were hardly novices when it came to unpleasant treatment of civilians and in fact Soviet internal repression was stepped up during the war. It was deeply unpleasant, but according to Bellamy, it worked. "With the Soviet Union we are dealing with a country that is very different from ours. It's easy for western historians to criticise the role of the NKVD and say it was counterproductive but I don't think that it was. I've seen very intelligent reports from NKVD officers criticising people for making arrests without reason. It was a highly professional security organisation."

Bellamy adds: "Without the totalitarian nature of Stalin's regime the Soviet Union could not have won the war. Democracy could not have fought such a war." For Bellamy it was not the failure of totalitarianism that brought down the Nazis but the failure of their brand of totalitarianism against that of the Russians. Inflexible elements of the Nazi ideology counted against their own war effort, such as the reluctance to mobilise women. By contrast, elements of the Bolsheviks' ideology could be removed where required.

Bellamy contends that the Second World War was not one conflict but "a combination of very different wars". The clash between Russia and Germany

was, he feels, "the greatest and most terrible" of these. Over the course of what the Russians call the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet Union lost close to 27 million people, over half of whom were civilians. In the process they inflicted over five million deaths on Germany and her allies and took another five million prisoners. The scale of the fighting was unmatched anywhere else in the Second World War and the Soviet Union was responsible for over 70 per cent of German battlefield casualties. Although Bellamy believes the combination of Allied strengths was vital, he says, "in terms of the war on land the Soviet contribution was the most significant".

Does the USSR therefore get sufficient recognition in Britain for the blood it shed and lost? "Until relatively recently I don't think that people did pay enough attention to the eastern front," says Bellamy. "However I think that the phrase the 'unknown war' that was once used is no longer appropriate because we've had terrific books by Antony Beevor and Max Hastings, which have brought the war on the eastern front alive."

So, as surviving veterans of the war grow ever fewer, it appears western interest in the greatest military clash in history is finally on the rise. ■

**Chris Bellamy** is professor emeritus of maritime security at the University of Greenwich

### JOURNEYS

Read also

► **Absolute War: Soviet Russia in the Second World War** by Chris Bellamy (*Pan Military Classics*, 2009)

► **Stalingrad** by Antony Beevor (*Penguin*, 2007)

► **The Greatest Battle: The Fight for Moscow 1941-42** by Andrew Nagorski (*Aurum*, 2008)

### Website

Read more about **Hitler's invasion of Russia** on the BBC's history website at [www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/hitler\\_russia\\_invasion\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/hitler_russia_invasion_01.shtml)

**BBC** [history/worldwars/wwtwo/hitler\\_russia\\_invasion\\_01.shtml](http://history/worldwars/wwtwo/hitler_russia_invasion_01.shtml)

## From Stalingrad to Berlin

DEFEAT FOR GERMANY was largely assured after Stalingrad but it would be well over two years before the surrender came. On 16 February 1943 the Soviet Union reclaimed the Ukrainian city Kharkov. However the Wehrmacht was far from finished, launching a spirited counterattack. A dangerous salient developed in the Russian lines around Kursk and on 5 July the Germans began a major offensive in an attempt to eliminate it. The stage was set for the largest tank battle of all time. Some 6,000 tanks were involved in the clash, where the Russian forces held firm.

From then on the Wehrmacht was on the defensive. Russian attacks in the ensuing months led to the seizure of Smolensk (25 September) and Kiev (6 November). On 28 November the first of the 'big three' conferences took place at Tehran, where Stalin pressed Churchill and Roosevelt to open a second front in western Europe. Early in 1944 the German blockaders of Leningrad were forced out, relieving the city after three cruel years of starvation. Then preparations began for the major summer offensive, Operation Bagration, which was initiated on 22 June in Belorussia. The Russian surge was a success. Within a couple of weeks Minsk was captured and by 31 July the Red Army had closed in on Warsaw. Here the Soviet high command took stock, opting not to assist an uprising by the inhabitants of the Polish capital that took place shortly afterwards. The final Soviet attack did not begin until 12 January 1945. In five days Warsaw was taken and then the race was on for Berlin.

The German capital was encircled on 25 April, the same day as American and Russian forces linked up on the Elbe. On 30 April the Red Flag was unfurled over the Reichstag and Hitler, realising the game was up, took his own life. The war in Europe officially ended on 8 May 1945.



The storming of the Reichstag in April 1945

Russian infantry emerge from a trench during Operation Bagration



### 5 July 1943

Hoping to regain the initiative the Germans spring an assault on Soviet forces around the city of Kursk. The resulting clash is the biggest tank battle in history and it ends in failure for the Wehrmacht.

### 27 January 1944

A Soviet offensive ends the German blockade of Leningrad. During nearly 900 days of the siege around 800,000 people died in the city.

### 23 June 1944

Three years and a day after the German invasion, the Soviet Union launches Operation Bagration with 1.25 million troops. German forces in Belorussia are devastated.

### 30 April 1945

As the Hammer & Sickle is planted on the Reichstag, Hitler kills himself. His dreams of world domination are over.

# I was there

Len Musgrove:

## I was death-marched across Germany

**T**OWARDS THE END of the war, as Russian troops pushed forward into Hitler's teetering Third Reich, tens of thousands of Allied Prisoners of War were evacuated and forcibly marched westward from their camps in Poland and Germany. My great uncle Len Musgrove was one of them. He was an internee at Stalag VIIIB near Lamsdorf, in what is now western Poland. "It all started on the Sunday afternoon on the

themselves. We ended up in a fir wood at a village called Rodewisch with the Americans under Patton on one side and the Jerries on the other, shelling each other. The Yanks deloused us and took us to Erfurt from where we were taken by plane to England. I only weighed eight stone when I got there."

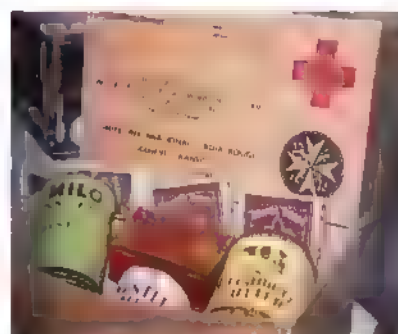
Len's party were marched through Germany, sleeping in barns, eating the contents of their Red Cross parcels and whatever they could pinch, walking almost every day, for four months. This

was an experience matched by many other POWs. "There were thousands and thousands of prisoners marching all over the place. A lot died. We weren't given any food apart from these Red Cross parcels that we were given when we started. We lived on what we could pinch. We were very ingenious at pinching stuff, like sugar beet, potatoes, beans. We used to just eat it as best we could. We'd have been glad to

eat anything raw. It was rough."

So how did Len survive this ordeal? "I'd always been a big walker and interested in where I was going. I can't say I enjoyed the walk but at least I never felt miserable about it. I took an interest in what was happening and where we were going and what we were doing."

However, he did come close to death at one point when he had a run-in with one of the guards. "One unpleasant Jerry guard caught me stealing some wood. I remember looking down the barrel of his rifle and I thought this is it. This is my end. I just looked down his gun and thought 'get on with it lad'. Instead of that, he lowered his rifle, swung it round and walloped me and



A Second World War Red Cross parcel was all that four men had to live on during the march

sent me flying. That was as near being shot as I ever was."

And then it was over. "When we were handed over in the middle of the night to the Americans, the German warrant officer who'd been in charge of the guards stood by and shook hands with everybody that went past. Whether he was feathering his nest in case of retaliation, I don't know. I think he was a reasonable sort of bloke and genuinely pleased it was all over for himself. I didn't feel any animosity towards any of them. Apart from that one incident where the chap was going to shoot me, I can't really say there was any obvious hostility." **U**

David Musgrove (talking to his great uncle)



The men of hut 16B Stalag VIIIB

last day of the year 1944. We were told all of a sudden to pack up, we were being evacuated. We were given a Red Cross parcel between four of us. It was snowing, cold as hell, and we were set off in the middle of the night. We didn't know where they were taking us.

"We were marched into a farmyard, pushed into barns and spent the night there. After that, it was march, march, march every day until the end of the war. It was winter when we set off but by the time we finished it was blazing sun. I reckon it was about 800 miles that we walked. I can visualise the route that our little party took: Görlitz, Jena, Meissen, Weimar and Eisenach. I don't know how many were in our group because people were looking after

### Len's war

Stationed in North Africa, he was part of an observation unit in the Western Desert, a group of five men on their own radioing back information on enemy movements to a unit HQ near Tobruk. In early May 1942, his position was overrun during a German offensive and he was captured, with 'good luck' being the only words of advice from the retreating British army. The rest of his war was a succession of prison camps, starting in Benghazi, then Tripoli, followed by a very unpleasant prison ship journey to Italy and another camp at Carpi in the north of that country. When Italy capitulated in late 1943, he was transported north over the Brenner Pass into Germany and so on to Lamsdorf.

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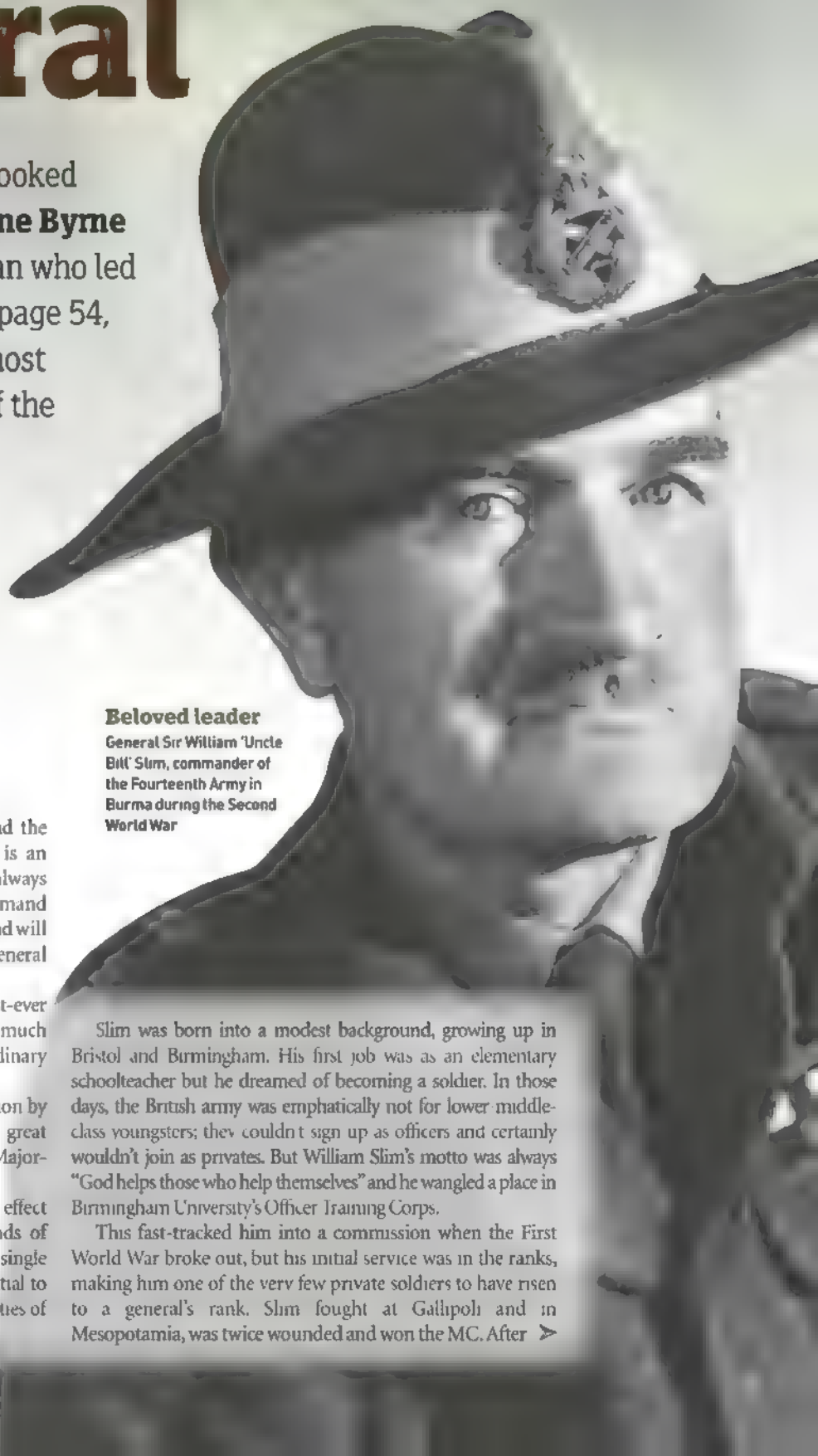
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# The Forgotten General

The Burma conflict is often overlooked when we consider the war. **Eugene Byrne** remembers William Slim, the man who led the campaign against Japan. On page 54, experts give their views on the most successful Allied commanders of the Second World War



## Beloved leader

General Sir William 'Uncle Bill' Slim, commander of the Fourteenth Army in Burma during the Second World War

**T**HE STORY of William Joseph Slim and the achievements of his multiracial army is an extraordinary one, but one which has always been obscured. The men under his command called themselves the Forgotten Army, and will tell you they were led by a forgotten general who has been unfairly overlooked.

"He was undoubtedly one of Britain's greatest-ever commanders. What marks him out from the crowd was much more than just his winning of a succession of extraordinary battles," says military historian Robert Lyman.

"I do think his achievements deserve more recognition by the general public. I believe he is recognised as a great commander by soldiers," says soldier-turned-historian Major-General Julian Thompson.

"His strength lay in his ability to produce a decisive effect from scratch," continues Lyman. "To mould thousands of disparate individuals together into a single team with a single goal, to persuade a defeated army that it had the potential to turn the tables on their enemies, to master the complexities of terrain, climate and administrative deficiency..."

Slim was born into a modest background, growing up in Bristol and Birmingham. His first job was as an elementary schoolteacher but he dreamed of becoming a soldier. In those days, the British army was emphatically not for lower middle-class youngsters; they couldn't sign up as officers and certainly wouldn't join as privates. But William Slim's motto was always "God helps those who help themselves" and he wangled a place in Birmingham University's Officer Training Corps.

This fast-tracked him into a commission when the First World War broke out, but his initial service was in the ranks, making him one of the very few private soldiers to have risen to a general's rank. Slim fought at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia, was twice wounded and won the MC. After >

the war he joined the Indian army, serving with the Gurkhas before going on to staff and teaching appointments. Not being a gentleman of private means, Slim supplemented his salary writing short stories.

The early years of the Second World War saw him leading small British forces in the Sudan, Iraq and Syria. In March 1942 he was appointed to command 'BurCorps', the under-strength force assigned to defend Burma from the Japanese. It faced the longest and most gruelling retreat in British military history.

He later wrote: 'Soaked to the skin, rotten with fever, ill fed and shivering as the air grew cooler, the troops went on, hour after hour, day after day. Their only rest at night was to lie on the sodden ground under the dripping trees, without even a blanket to cover them... On the last day of the 900-mile retreat I... watched the rearguard march into India. All of them, British, Indian and Gurkha, were gaunt and ragged as scarecrows. Yet as they trudged behind their surviving officers in groups pitifully small, they still carried their arms and kept their ranks, they were still recognisable as fighting units. They might look like scarecrows, but they looked like soldiers too.'

### Jungle warfare

"Slim was the perfect man for the job in Burma," says David Smurthwaite, museum development officer at the National Army Museum. "His early experience of command during the campaigns in Ethiopia, Syria, and Persia in 1940-41 taught him much about warfare on scant resources in difficult terrain. Where he was allowed to use his initiative, Slim's fighting of Burma Corps during the retreat to the borders of India in 1942 was first-rate." Many non-combatants were less fortunate. Indian and British civilians in Burma fled, little realising how difficult the going would be. Thousands died en route.

In early 1943, a British attack in the Arakan region of Burma was a costly failure. Its architect, Lieutenant-General Noel Irwin, handed control of it to Slim, who once more saved an army from annihilation. Irwin attempted to blame Slim for the failed offensive, hinting that he would probably be relieved of his command. Fortunately, Major-General Archibald Wavell, commander-in-chief in India, saw through this and Irwin was dismissed instead. Irwin famously had the grace to cable Slim saying: "You're not sacked. I am".

## The battlefield was 700 miles of roadless, disease-ridden, jungle-clad mountains, drenched by monsoon rains

Slim was now assigned command of the whole Eastern Army, soon renamed the Fourteenth Army. It looked like a poisoned chalice. The battlefield was 700 miles of roadless, disease-ridden, jungle-clad mountains, drenched by monsoon rains for three or four months each spring. A single pack mule was more useful than a two-tonne truck, and a Dakota transport plane was beyond price. The army was starved of supplies by the war in Europe and laid low by dysentery and malaria – at one point 80 per cent of the entire strength was on the sick list. The demoralised troops considered the Japanese a race of supermen. They feared the jungle – assuming (wrongly) that the Japanese were familiar with such terrain. 'The Forgotten Army' resented the lack of attention from home.

Simple procedures brought malaria under control, and talented officers were assigned to build roads, airfields and



A chat with Uncle Bill: Slim inspects troops of his jungle army in Burma in 1944

supply bases. Slim then spent as much time as possible visiting the troops. "I was in these first few months more like a parliamentary candidate than a general," he said. "Except that I never made a promise."

The Fourteenth Army, men from all over the empire, had to be moulded to a single purpose. Many British conscripts wondered why they were fighting so far from home, while enthusiasm for the Raj was waning among the Indians who made up two-thirds of the army. Indeed, some Indians even fought alongside the Japanese in nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army.

Professor Christopher Bayly, co-author of *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia 1941-45* (Allen Lane, 2004), says: "British Indian troops had an ethos of loyalty. They did not wish to let down their families, their kin or their communities. Some, especially among the officers, did believe that Japanese imperialism was brutal and barbaric, even if they warned their British officers that British rule in India must end after the war was won. Slim was a brilliant organiser and publicist who was able to mobilise his troops against what came to be regarded as an inhumanly cruel enemy".

In this, the Allies were helped by the astounding stupidity and arrogance of Japanese treatment of conquered territories. Many Asian peoples were prepared to welcome them as liberators, but their brutality soon shattered any illusions.

Slim was emphatic that all soldiers, regardless of race or rank, were to be treated with respect. He told his officers: "You

GETTY



## William Slim 1891–1970

### 6 August 1891

William Joseph Slim is born in Belmont Road, Bishopston, Bristol, the son of a modestly prosperous ironmonger

### September 1914

Commissioned into Royal Warwickshire Regiment

### 23 September 1939

At the rank of brigadier, Slim is given command of the Tenth Indian Brigade

### November 1940

Captures Italian-held town of Gallabat, in Sudan, but has to withdraw for lack of air cover

### January 1941

Wounded in Eritrea, Slim returns to India and in May is given temporary appointment of major-general, commanding Tenth Indian Division in Iraq

### March 1942

Appointed commander of First Burma Corps and oversees successful retreat from Burma

### April to May 1943

Slim successfully extricates the army from the abortive Arakan offensive

### March to June 1944

Defeats Japanese at battle of Kohima-Imphal. In December is knighted in the field at Imphal by Lord Wavell, Viceroy of India

### January to March 1945

Slim defeats the Japanese in the Meiktila-Mandalay campaign

### August 1945

Appointed commander-in-chief, Land Forces, South East Asia, replacing Sir Oliver Leese

### 1947

Retires from Indian army and takes a job as deputy chairman of the newly-nationalised British Railways, but returns to British army shortly afterwards as chief of the Imperial General Staff

### 1949

Promoted to field marshal

### 1953–60

Serves as governor-general of Australia

### 1960

Created viscount, taking title of Viscount Slim of Yarralumla in the Capital Territory of Australia and of Bishopston in the city and county of Bristol

### 14 December 1970

Dies in London



Slim's army included troops from all over the empire, including these Gurkhas



General Slim is knighted by the Viceroy of India, Field Marshal Wavell, 15 December 1944



A civilian Sir William at home with Lady Slim shortly before his recall to the army in 1948

will neither eat, nor drink, nor sleep, nor smoke, nor even sit down until you have personally seen that your men have done those things. If you will do this for them, they will follow you to the end of the world. And, if you do not, I will break you". To his British soldiers he was Uncle Bill; to the Indians, Chacha ('uncle' in Urdu) Slim sahib.

### Conquering fear

Slim ordered his officers to concentrate on patrolling in the jungle. Fear of the Japanese was overcome by attacking small Japanese outposts with superior numbers. The sum of little victories was the end of the myth of Japanese invincibility – and instilled a growing realisation that the jungle was neutral. Once, wrote Slim, a group of his beloved Gurkhas returned from patrol and "proudly opened a large basket, lifted from it three gory Japanese heads, and laid them on his table. They then politely offered him for his dinner the freshly caught fish which filled the rest of the basket".

At the same time, the 'Chindit' raids, the large forces operating behind Japanese lines led by the eccentric Orde Wingate, operating independently of Slim, also helped demonstrate that the Japanese could be defeated. Slim was also assisted by the arrival of Lord Mountbatten as supreme Allied commander, South East Asia theatre, in October 1943. Mountbatten recognised Slim's formidable talents and proved a supportive boss. Equally importantly, Mountbatten skilfully handled his acerbic deputy, the American general Joseph 'Vinegar Joe' Stilwell and the nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek, whose forces were also engaged with the Japanese.

Slim had come to the job with radical theories. From now on, there were no non-combatants; everyone, including cooks, drivers and hospital orderlies, would double up as infantrymen when necessary. If a unit was surrounded, it would fight on until it was relieved and it would be supplied from the air. These defensive 'boxes' would form the anvils against which the Japanese would be hammered by relieving forces. This worked in January 1944 in the Arakan, and again on a much larger scale when the main Japanese offensive of that year struck at Imphal, further north. The RAF and US Army Air Force resupplied besieged positions that held out against ferocious attacks until the Japanese were worn out. Then Slim counterattacked. Some 100,000 Japanese soldiers had set out across the Chindwin river in March; in July, 35,000 crossed back, broken by hunger, exhaustion and disease.

The battle of Kohima-Imphal was the first major land defeat inflicted on the Japanese army by the Allies. Its success was based on Slim's radical strategy, which aimed not to capture territory, but to break the enemy army by destroying its ability and will to fight.

The following year's Meiktila-Mandalay campaign is still studied in staff colleges. It was a daring attack in which everything was improvised – including strategy. Major-General Thompson, who himself commanded large numbers of men during the Falklands Campaign, is hugely impressed by Slim's ability to fight a war of manoeuvre. "In just 24 hours he rejigged his plan for crossing the Irrawaddy and fighting the battle south of Mandalay. That showed real flexibility of thought, and great moral courage."

The Fourteenth Army crossed the Irrawaddy river over the longest Bailey bridge in the world – most of which had been transported by mule. A standing Fourteenth Army joke was that its bridges were lashed together from bamboo and

bootlaces. Robert Lyman, author of *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (Constable & Robinson, London, 2004), says: "He took enormous risks with logistics. Indeed, the Burma campaign was as much a struggle for mastery of logistics as it was a struggle for mastery on the battlefield... Great efforts were made to increase the quantity of supplies to Burma. Railways were extended, roads built and surfaced, sunken ferries refloated and repaired, barges and rafts built for use on the numerous waterways. Huge reliance was placed on air transport to sustain his armies, and without these transport aircraft he could not possibly have achieved all that he did".

At Meiktila-Mandalay, the Japanese army was caught off-guard and comprehensively defeated. Japanese commander Lieutenant-General Heitaro Kimura later called the campaign "the masterstroke of Allied strategy." David Smurthwaite of the National Army Museum points out: "Many of these (Japanese) men, and especially their officers, showed a fierce determination to go on fighting, even by June 1945 when defeat was everywhere apparent. Knowing that they were not going to win did not stop Japanese soldiers from fighting to the death". If they were out of ammunition, they'd use a sharpened bamboo stake, or hide in foxholes to detonate bombs when tanks passed over. On one occasion, a group of officers charged British tanks with their swords.

Historical novelist George MacDonald Fraser served in the Meiktila-Mandalay campaign, and spoke to *BBC History* about it a few years before his death. He was impressed by the professionalism of his comrades: "Our brigade consisted of one British battalion, one Gurkha and one Baluchi, and we all got on very well... You were struck by how much better we were than the Japanese. The English soldiers with whom I served were very, very good at what they did. So were the Baluchis – well, they were North West Frontiersmen, you couldn't teach them anything – and similarly the Gurkhas. The Japs weren't in the same street as us. Brave, yes. Very, very brave, but just not that clever." The Burmese people rose in revolt, and a separate amphibious attack captured Rangoon, where Mountbatten presided over an elaborate victory parade on 15 June, although pockets of die-hards fought on.

### Support for the sepoy general

What happened next drove this highly professional army to the edge of mutiny.

Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese, a suave Guards officer whose previous career had been in North Africa and Italy, had been made commander in chief of Allied Land Forces, South East Asia, in late 1944. Leese considered Slim to be in need of a rest and told him he was to be put in charge of mopping-up operations in Burma.

This was a demotion and everyone knew it. The normally easygoing Slim refused to take the job, and the Fourteenth Army was outraged. Mountbatten backed him and it was Leese who was dismissed instead.

Slim was called to London where he met Churchill for the first time. After they had dined, the prime minister was holding



Many experts rate Slim as the greatest of British and Allied wartime generals

forth, bullish about his chances in the coming general election. Slim demonstrated his sure grasp of his soldiers' feelings saying, "Well prime minister, I know one thing. My army won't be voting for you" Churchill was impressed by the candour of the man he had once dismissed as a mere "sepoy general", and gave him Leese's job.

The Fourteenth Army was the last great army of the British empire, but its victories paved the way for the empire's end, not its restoration. "The collapse of British rule would have been a matter of time," says Christopher Bayly. "Burma might have been held for a few years longer had its young men not been radicalised and militarised by the war. In India, the popular reaction in favour of the Indian National Army when they were brought to trial in 1945, including men of the hitherto loyal British Indian Army, began to convince the British that the game wasn't worth the candle."

Slim became Governor-General of Australia in 1953 where he was popular and uncontroversial. He published his memoirs, retired to Britain in 1960 and was created a viscount.

Today, the best-known of Britain's Second World War veterans' organisation is the Burma Star Association, a testament to the spirit that Slim forged. Few veterans need convincing that Uncle Bill was one of the greatest commanders of the war and many historians agree. David Smurthwaite notes drily: "One interesting aspect of any assessment of Slim's career is that no one since the war has attempted to do a hatchet job on him. That is comparatively rare for a Second World War commander of Slim's significance".

## Slim was emphatic that all soldiers, regardless of race or rank, were to be treated with respect

Jon Latimer, author of *Burma: The Forgotten War* (John Murray, 2004), one of the best accounts of the war in recent years, says: "Montgomery was a very efficient and effective commander, but he never lacked for means nor did he ever show any great flair for improvisation... Compared to anything undertaken by Montgomery, Slim's achievements are truly astonishing, and it is doubtful whether Monty could have done the same in similar circumstances. Slim's memoirs are also much better than Monty's, both in literary terms and in terms of honesty. Slim saw the whole thing through from almost the very beginning and turned disaster into triumph.

"The Burma campaign was largely overlooked at the time and even today gets far less attention than the Mediterranean and

European campaigns... But the Japanese government of the time was brutal and aggressive, and dominated by the military. Somebody had to defeat it; and not simply by naval blockade or atomic bomb. The Japanese army had to be comprehensively beaten to avoid a Germany post-First-World-War-style claim of betrayal. The Japanese regime in Burma threatening India and China was one such place, and Slim and the Fourteenth Army achieved it, in the face of colossal difficulties a truly great feat of arms." **11**

Eugene Byrne is an author and journalist with particular interests in British and Irish history

### JOURNEYS

#### Book

► **Slim: The Standardbearer** by Ronald Lewin (Leo Cooper, 1976)

► **Defeat into Victory** by Field Marshal Viscount Slim (Pan, 2009)

► **Unofficial History** by Field Marshal Viscount Slim (Cassell, 1959)



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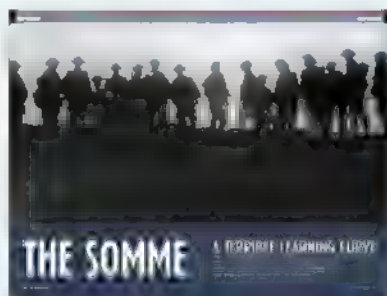
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# WAR LEADERS WHO

William Slim was a superb general, who won a series of extraordinary battles. But who were the other great leaders who contributed to the Allied victory? *BBC History Magazine* asked six leading military historians which Allied commander they felt was most successful in the Second World War

Jeremy Black

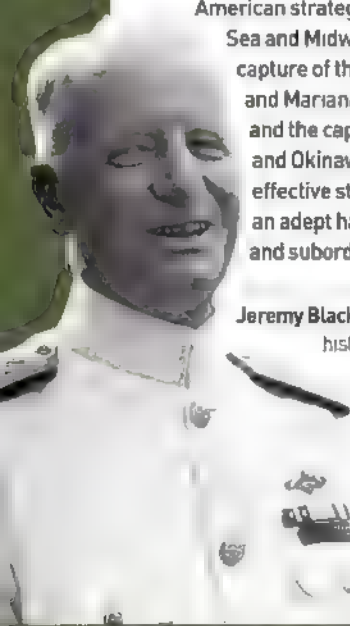
## Admiral Chester W Nimitz



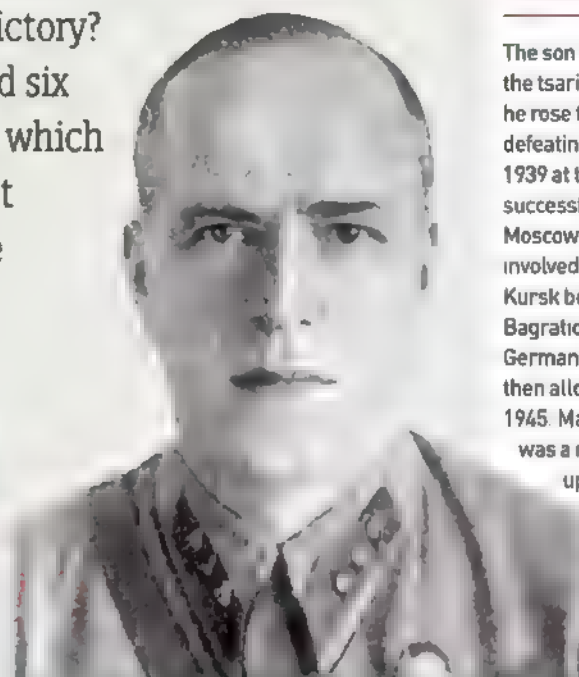
The scale of the American war in the Pacific was unprecedented in joint-operations and entailed the most successful carrier and submarine campaigns in history. It was also particularly impressive because it was launched against a leading and active naval power that had put much effort into carrier warfare. Nimitz had a varied background, including in submarines. Admiral and commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet from the end of 1941 and commander-in-chief of the Pacific Oceans Areas from April 1942, he played a key role in planning

American strategy, from the Coral Sea and Midway in 1942 to the capture of the Gilbert, Marshall and Mariana Islands (1943-4) and the capture of Iwo Jima and Okinawa (1945). An effective strategist, Nimitz was an adept handler of colleagues and subordinates.

Jeremy Black is professor of history at Exeter University



Chester Nimitz faced an uphill struggle against an established naval power



Georgi Zhukov, one of the heroes of the Soviet push across Europe

Matthew Hughes

## Marshal Georgi Zhukov



The son of a village cobbler, Zhukov joined the tsarist army in 1915. After the revolution, he rose through the ranks of the Red Army, defeating Japanese forces in Manchuria in 1939 at the battle of Khalkin Gol. He successfully defended Leningrad and Moscow in late 1941. Thereafter, he was involved in the battles of Stalingrad and Kursk before co-ordinating Operation Bagration, a 'deep battle' that shattered German Army Group Centre in 1944. Stalin then allowed Zhukov's men into Berlin first in 1945. Made a field marshal in 1943, Zhukov was a ruthless commander willing to stand up to Stalin. His genius lay in his ability to transform the Soviet army into one capable of defeating Germany and so winning the war in Europe.

Matthew Hughes is professor of military history at Brunel University

Richard Holmes

## Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay



It seems odd for a military historian to pick a naval hero, but I believe that Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay doesn't get his due credit. As Vice Admiral Dover he was responsible for the naval side of the Dunkirk evacuation. Had the whole of the BEF been lost it is hard to see how Britain could have remained in the war. Ramsay became Britain's leading expert on amphibious landings, planning operations in North Africa, Sicily, Normandy and Walcheren.

He was naval commander-in-chief for D-Day, and it is thanks to his common sense that the Allied naval team pulled together without the friction that marked the land and air campaigns.

Prof Richard Holmes was a military historian and broadcaster. He died in 2011



Bertram Ramsay was a voice of calm common sense at vital times



# COMMAND RESPECT

Trevor Royle

## General George Smith Patton



Forget his relentless self-promotion and his frequently unhinged behaviour: General Patton was one of the outstanding land force commanders of the Second World War. In the breakout from Normandy in the summer of 1945 Patton proved to be the one Allied general who understood the art of blitzkrieg warfare and in postwar interviews German generals revealed that he was their most feared opponent. He inspired an unswerving loyalty in his men, perhaps difficult to understand in the light of his bullying attitudes, but he also gave them the self-belief to take on and defeat the enemy. Wars are won by commanders of Patton's stamp.

Trevor Royle is a writer and broadcaster

George Patton: the German generals' most feared opponent

Christina Goulter

## Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder



Best known for his time as the head of Anglo-American air forces in the Middle East, Mediterranean and north Africa, and then as Eisenhower's deputy in 1944-5, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder was the driving force behind forging closer operational links between the army and the air force. It can be said, therefore, that he was one of the chief architects of ultimate victory in Europe. Tedder had that rare quality of being able to grasp the big picture and detail simultaneously, so was equally at home at the tactical and strategic levels of war, and this also applied to his leadership style: he was 'unstuffy' with air marshals and other ranks alike. But his single most valuable attribute was his political skill. He made a point of getting on with everyone, particularly Allies, and this proved vital at a number of points during the war when serious tensions arose between the senior operational commanders, particularly so during the D-Day period, when the key air and land commanders fell out. Tedder's deft handling of the situation ensured that the Normandy campaign was not jeopardised.



Arthur Tedder: a firm grasp of the big picture

Dr Christina Goulter is a senior lecturer in Defence Studies at King's College London

Gary Sheffield

## General Dwight D Eisenhower

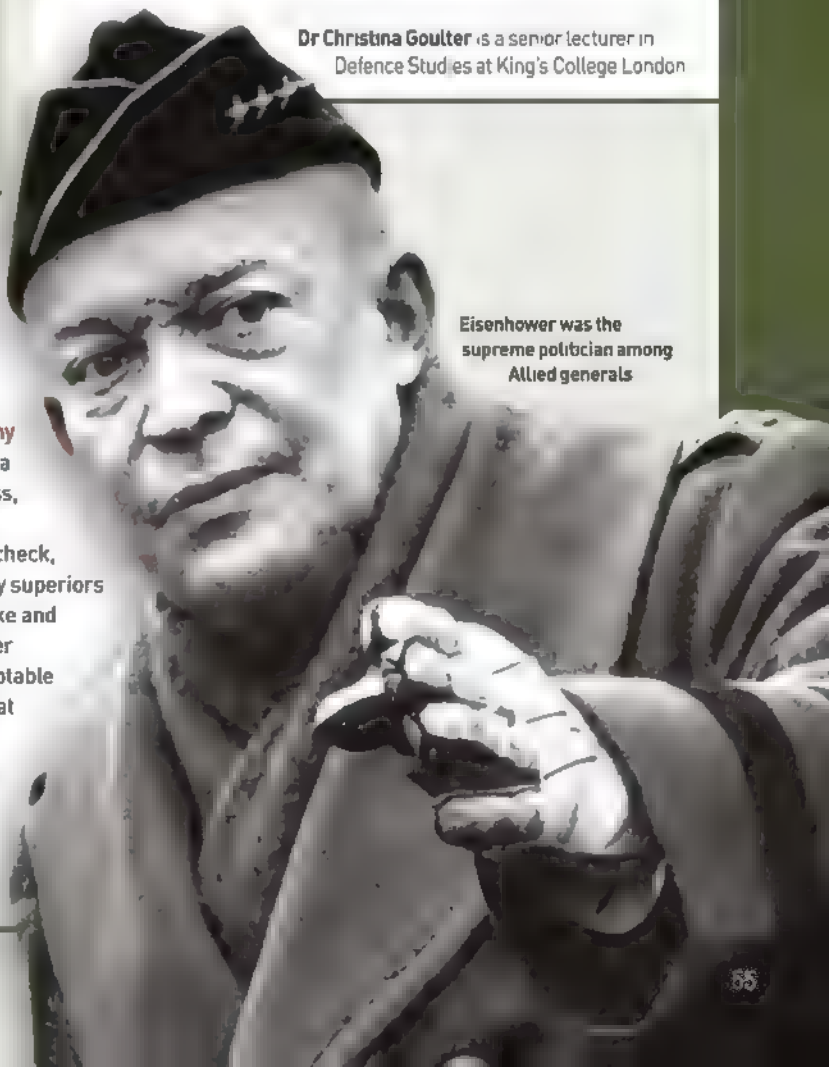


I suspect that the most successful commander of the Second World War should really be a Red Army general like Zhukov, given the gigantic role of the USSR in defeating Hitler's Germany. However, I will opt for Dwight D Eisenhower, supreme Allied commander in 1944-45. 'Ike' was not a great battlefield general, and his Broad Front strategy for the advance into Germany has been rightly criticised. But he was a brilliant military diplomat who held a disparate and often feuding coalition force of Americans, British, Canadians, Poles, French and other nationalities

together. Ike's tact and sunny personality, combined with a veiled streak of ruthlessness, kept prima donnas such as Montgomery and Patton in check, and his political and military superiors (Churchill, Roosevelt, Brooke and Marshall) at bay. Eisenhower delivered victory at an acceptable cost in Allied casualties. That was a great achievement.

Gary Sheffield holds the chair of war studies at the University of Wolverhampton

Eisenhower was the supreme politician among Allied generals



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**BBC** **HiSTORY**  
MAGAZINE

The world still struggles to understand the minds of those who committed the atrocities at the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz. **Laurence Rees** has interviewed war criminals from German, Russian and Japanese camps and he explains why many of the former Nazi soldiers he met had a different mentality from the others

# AUSCHWITZ



**W**HAT SORT of man was capable of creating the site of the largest

recorded mass murder in history, where acts of atrocity were everyday occurrences? Perhaps someone like Amon Göth, commandant of Plaszow labour camp in Poland (memorably portrayed by Ralph Fiennes in the film *Schindler's List*), an irrational, sadistic monster utterly different from the people you encounter in everyday life.

But if you imagined such a person was commandant of Auschwitz, then you're wrong. According to his interrogator at the Nuremberg war trials, Whitney Harris, Rudolf Höss

appeared "normal", "like a grocery clerk". Prisoners who came across him at Auschwitz confirmed this view, adding that Höss always appeared calm and collected. There is no record of him ever personally hitting – let alone killing – anyone at the camp.

Höss lived with his wife and children in a house just yards from the crematorium in Auschwitz's main camp, where some of the earliest killing experiments were conducted using the poisonous insecticide Zyklon B. During his working day Höss presided over the murder of more than a million people, but at home he lived the life of a solid middle-class German father and husband. It is this apparent normality that makes Höss a more terrifying figure than an unhinged brute like

Göth, and compels us to try – in so far as it is possible – to understand him and the circumstances that made his murderous career possible.

Like most ardent Nazis, Höss's character and beliefs had been shaped by his reaction to the previous 30 years of German history. Born in Baden-Baden, in the Black Forest, to Catholic parents in 1900, Höss was affected in his early years by a series of important influences: an overbearing father; his service in the First World War where he was the youngest NCO in the German army; his sense of betrayal at the subsequent loss of the war; his service in the paramilitary Freikorps in the early 1920s in an attempt to counter the perceived communist threat on the boundaries of Germany, and ➤

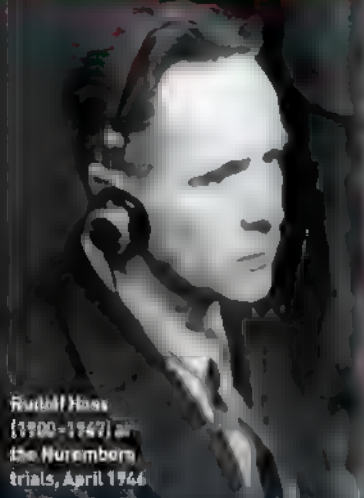
#### Into Auschwitz

Railroad tracks leading to the entrance gate at Birkenau, part of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp. Around 1,100,000 died in the Auschwitz camp complex.

MORE  
from the  
**BBC**  
▶ page 64

# HIWITZ

## Rudolf Höss Master of murder

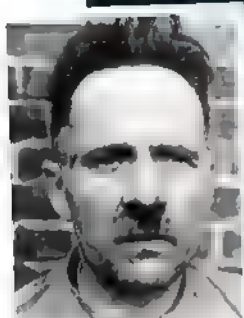


Rudolf Höss  
(1900–1947) at  
the Nuremberg  
trials, April 1946

**RUDOLF HÖSS** was Auschwitz commandant 1940–43. He joined the army during the First World War and in 1924 spent two years in prison, indicted with Martin

Bormann, who later played a leading role in the Nazi party, for murdering a man they claimed to be a traitor. He joined the Nazi party in 1922 and became a full-time SS member in 1934. He worked in Sachsenhausen and Dachau before taking control of

Auschwitz where he pioneered the use of Zyklon B for extermination. This led to a posting at the SS HQ in charge of concentration camps. In 1945 he avoided arrest and in 1946 was caught working on a farm. He gave evidence at the Nuremberg trials and was handed over to the Poles by the War Crimes Commission. He was executed at Auschwitz in 1947. In prison, he wrote his autobiography – the royalties are given to a fund for Auschwitz survivors.



Höss after his arrest in north Germany, 1946

## Höss lived with his wife and children in a house just yards from the crematorium in Auschwitz main camp

involvement in violent right-wing politics that led to a two-year imprisonment.

Many other Nazis were moulded in the same way, not least Adolf Hitler. Son of a domineering father, nursing his violent hatred of those he felt had lost

Germany the war in which he had just fought (and during which, like Höss, he had been awarded an Iron Cross) Hitler tried to seize power in a violent putsch in the same year as Höss was involved in a politically inspired murder.

For Hitler, Höss and others on the nationalist right, the most urgent need was to understand why Germany had lost the First World War and made what they felt was such a humiliating peace: and in the postwar years they believed they had found the answer. Was it not obvious, they felt, that the Jews had been responsible? Had not somehow the Jews, with their alleged communist sympathies, stabbed Germany in the back? It didn't matter that large numbers of loyal German Jews had

fought with bravery (and many died) during the war. Nor that thousands of German Jews were neither left wing nor communist. It was easier for Höss, Hitler and the other Nazis to find a scapegoat for Germany's predicament in the German Jews.

### International conspiracy

Höss claimed to have little quarrel with individuals – the problem for him was the 'International World

Jewish conspiracy' by which he fantasised that Jews secretly held the levers of power and sought to help each other across national boundaries. This was what he believed had led to Germany's defeat in the First World War and what he felt had to be destroyed. He later wrote: "As a fanatical National Socialist I was firmly convinced that our ideals would gradually be accepted and would prevail throughout the world... Jewish supremacy would thus be abolished".

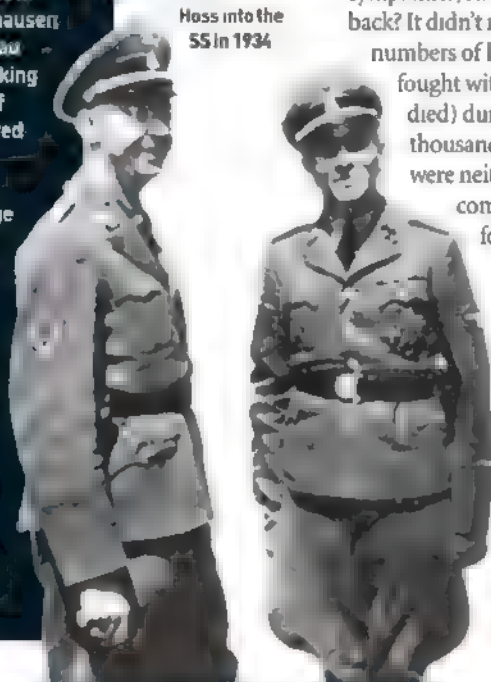
Höss was almost one of the founding members of the Nazi party, joining up in November 1922. Heinrich Himmler, the Third Reich's leader of the SS from 1929, an ardent Nazi talent spotter, knew Höss from the early days. He invited Höss to become a full-time member of the SS and in November 1934 Höss arrived at Dachau in Bavaria to start his service as a concentration camp guard.

Today, certainly in Britain and America, there exists confusion about the function of a place like Dachau. Concentration camps like Dachau (established on 22 March 1933, less than two months after Adolf Hitler became German chancellor) were different from death camps like Treblinka which were not in existence until the middle of the war. Adding further to the confusion is the complex history of Auschwitz, the most infamous camp of all, which was to evolve into both a concentration and a death camp. Unlike these later camps, Dachau in the 1930s was not a place of mass murder – the majority sent there were released after a year to 18 months.

While Dachau was always a place where intense mental and physical suffering were inflicted on the prisoners – and in the course of its existence many inmates did die – it was easy for Höss to rationalise what happened there. He felt it important to forcibly 're-educate' the internal opponents of the Third Reich.

Höss's three and a half years at Dachau were to play a defining role in shaping his mentality. Above all else, Höss learnt the essential philosophy of the SS while in Dachau. Theodor Eicke,

Himmler, left,  
recruited  
Höss into the  
SS in 1934



## Timeline: Auschwitz and the Final Solution

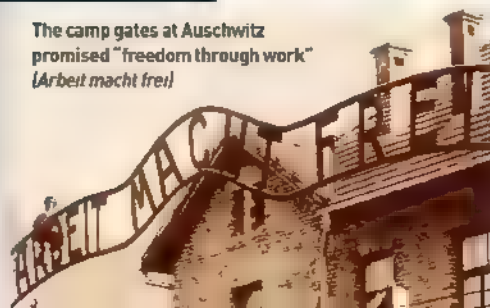
### 1933

Dachau, the first Nazi concentration camp, is established near Munich

### May 1940

Rudolph Höss arrives in the Polish town of Oswiecim to create a new concentration camp on the site of a deserted Polish army barracks

The camp gates at Auschwitz promised "freedom through work" (*Arbeit macht frei*)



### 14 June 1940

The first Polish political prisoners arrive at Auschwitz. The regime is brutal. More than half of the first 20,000 Poles who are sent to Auschwitz are dead within 18 months



# The system of camps

AS SOON as the National Socialists took power in 1933 they began to round up their enemies and place them into camps. The early camps run by the SA (*Sturmabteilung*, or Brownshirts) soon gave way to **concentration camps**. The first of these was Dachau near Munich, and the early prisoners were mostly political opponents of the regime but also included **criminals, homosexuals, trade unionists, gypsies and Jews**.

The camps were administered by the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps which was directly under the **SS leader Heinrich Himmler**. Conditions inside were brutal and often fatal, though the ultimate aim was not to murder every inmate. They were penal institutions and many had an economic function, particularly during the war. Prisoners provided cheap labour

and were used in many branches of industry.

At its peak in 1944 the concentration camp network comprised **over 500 camps** (including sub-camps of the major camps).

The Wannsee Conference in January 1942 formalised the Final Solution. Several death camps (▲ on the map), similar to the already-established **Chelmo Extermination Centre**, were opened. There were six in total, all located in modern-day Poland. The aim of the death camps was the **systematic extermination** of Jews, while gypsies, homosexuals and others considered undesirable also suffered and died.

Gas chambers were the most common method of murder, and the bodies were then burned in crematoria. It's estimated that more than six million people were



killed in the camps, not including the several million Soviet prisoners of war. At Auschwitz alone it has been established that **1.1 million people were killed** – one million of them Jews. Among other camps, **Treblinka** was particularly appalling – around 900,000 Jews were murdered there.

could be far from instantaneous, it was certainly the case that for the Nazis at Auschwitz the use of Zyklon B alleviated the process of murder. Höss wrote that he was relieved that this new method of killing had been found as he would be spared a "bloodbath".

At the new camp being built at Birkenau two miles away from Auschwitz main camp, Höss oversaw the conversion of two cottages into gas chambers and the completion, in 1943, of a total of four crematoria with gas chambers attached. These would contribute to the destruction of one million, one hundred thousand people at Auschwitz. One million of them were Jews, who began to be sent to the camp in large numbers in the spring of 1942 as part of the Nazis' Final Solution.

## Innovation and efficiency

Crucial to understanding how it was possible for Höss to carry on calmly and faithfully organising the killing, is the knowledge that he was never faced with one sudden command to commit mass murder. His long career in concentration camps prepared him step by step for the moment when the gassings began at Auschwitz. Indeed, he saw his subordinate's innovation of the use of Zyklon B as a killing device as an "improvement" – a method of murder that carried with it less potential to cause psychological damage to his men than killing by firing squad.

Höss was no mere robot, blindly following orders, but an innovator in

the first commandant (who in 1934 rose to be the Reich's inspector of concentration camps), had preached one doctrine from the first – hardness: "Anyone who shows even the slightest vestige of sympathy towards them [prisoners] must immediately vanish from our ranks. I need only hard, totally committed SS men. There is no place amongst us for soft people".

Höss was a model member of the SS and in April 1936 he was made Rapportführer, chief assistant to the commander of the camp. In September 1936 he was promoted to lieutenant and in 1938 transferred to Sachsenhausen concentration camp where he remained until his elevation to commandant of the new concentration camp at Auschwitz.

This then was the man who arrived at Auschwitz in May 1940, with six years service behind him as a concentration camp guard. He felt ready to take on his biggest challenge: creating a new concentration camp from a few vermin-infested barracks. He knew what was expected of him and his experience at Dachau and Sachsenhausen offered a blueprint for him to follow. But his

superiors had other plans, and over the next months and years the camp Höss built at Auschwitz was to develop along a very different path indeed.

Höss oversaw the transformation of Auschwitz, during the first year or so of the camp's existence. Originally a poorly resourced but brutal concentration camp for Poles, it expanded with the need to provide slave labour to build a giant synthetic oil and rubber factory at nearby Monowitz. It changed again with the arrival of Soviet prisoners of war in July 1941. It was to murder these Soviet prisoners (considered sub-human by committed Nazis), as well as to kill those thought unfit to work, that Zyklon B was first used at Auschwitz. Höss's deputy, Fritzsche, first thought of using the poisonous crystals, and Höss records that he personally attended the first gassing he could: "Protected by a gas mask, I watched the killing myself. In the crowded cells death came instantaneously the moment the Zyklon B was thrown in. A short, almost smothered cry and it was all over". While the evidence is that death

## 22 June 1941

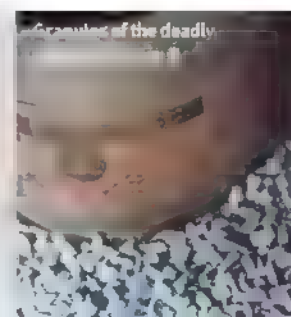
Germany invades the Soviet Union. Nazi killing squads, the *Einsatzgruppen*, operate in Russia, inciting pogroms, murdering Jews in the service of the party or the state

## 28 July 1941

575 sick/disabled inmates at Auschwitz are selected for **gassing**. As part of the adult euthanasia scheme they are sent to Germany to be gassed with bottled carbon monoxide

## 14 August 1941

Himmler visits the HQ of Einsatzgruppe B in Minsk and earns that shooting women and children is causing some of his troops **psychological damage**



## Autumn 1941

The first Auschwitz gassing takes place using Zyklon B, a powerful insecticide, to kill Soviet POWs

the way he organized the killing. On occasion he felt able to question, even criticise his boss, Heinrich Himmler. In March 1941, for example, Höss objected to the expansion of Auschwitz – citing practical difficulties – and frankly told Himmler so. Strange as it may seem, the Nazi leadership allowed functionaries lower down to use their initiative and voice their views. Höss knew he never needed to fear terrible retribution if he questioned an order. He had joined the SS because he believed wholeheartedly in the overall Nazi vision, and he felt free to criticise the details of its implementation. He was that most powerful of subordinates, someone who was doing his job not because he was told to, but because he believed that what he was doing was right.

Höss was behaving in a similar manner to many of the former Nazis I have met who, unlike him, survived to be re-integrated back into German postwar society. And there is something about the mentality of the Nazis that seems at odds with the perpetrators who flourished in other totalitarian regimes. That was certainly the conclusion I reached after several projects, both TV series and books, on the Second World War. This has meant that I have met perpetrators from all three of the major totalitarian powers – Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union. Having done so I can confirm that the Nazi war criminals I met were different.

In the Soviet Union the climate of fear under Stalin was pervasive in a way it never was in Germany under Hitler until the last days of the war. The description one former Soviet Air Force officer gave me of open meetings in the 1930s when anyone could be denounced as an ‘enemy of the people’ still haunts me. No one was safe from the knock on the door at midnight. No matter how well you tried to conform, no matter how many slogans you spouted, such was Stalin’s malevolence that nothing

you did or said or thought could save you if the spotlight picked you out.

### Voting for Hitler

But in Nazi Germany, unless you were a member of a specific risk group – like the Jews, the communists, the gypsies, homosexuals, the ‘work-shy’ (a euphemism for prostitutes and criminals), and indeed anyone who opposed the regime – you could live comparatively free from fear. Despite recent academic work that emphasises how the Gestapo relied upon denunciations from members of the public to do its work, the central truth still holds that the majority of the German population – almost certainly right up until the moment Germany started to lose the war – felt so personally secure and happy that they would have voted to keep Hitler in power if there had been free and fair elections. In contrast, in the Soviet Union not even Stalin’s most loyal colleagues felt they could sleep securely.

The consequence of this for those who perpetrated crimes at Stalin’s behest was that the suffering they inflicted was so arbitrary that they often

didn’t know the reasons for it. The former Soviet secret policeman I met who bundled Kalmyks up and put them on trains to exile in Siberia in the winter, still didn’t have a clear idea about what was behind the policy even today (during the Second World War Stalin, suspicious of the loyalty of the Kalmyks ethnic group, deported the whole nation – over half died during the journey and exile). The policeman had one stock response when asked why he’d taken part – ironically it’s the one most commonly ascribed to Nazis in popular myth – he said he’d been “acting under orders”. He’d committed a crime because he was told to, and knew that if he didn’t then he’d be shot, and he trusted that his bosses knew what they were doing. Which meant, of course, that when Stalin died and communism fell he was free to move on

**“I need only hard, totally committed SS men. There is no place amongst us for soft people”**



**Stripped of everything** Inmates at Auschwitz were made to remove prostheses before entering the gas chambers

### October 1941

Plans for the new camp at Birkenau are altered to **exclude living space** 10,000 Soviet POWs arrive to build the extension. Less than 1,000 are alive the following spring

### October 1941

**The first German Jews are deported** to eastern Europe. Late in 1941 Belzec, a small experimental gas camp, is built as a place to kill ‘unproductive’ Jews

### January 1942

Chełmno, a base for ‘gas vans’ (in which 50 to 70 people were killed at a time), begins murdering selected **Jews from the Lodz ghetto**

### 20 January 1942

**Senior Nazis meet at the Wannsee conference** to co-ordinate the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” and to agree a definition of Jew



and leave the past behind. It also shows up Stalin as a cruel, bullying dictator, who has many parallels in history, not least in our own time.

Then there were the Japanese war criminals I encountered who committed some of the most appalling atrocities in modern history. In China, during Japan's occupation in the Second Sino-Japanese War 1931–45, Japanese soldiers split open pregnant women and bayoneted the foetuses, they used local farmers for target practice; they tortured thousands of innocent people in ways that rival the Gestapo at their worst, and they were pursuing medical experiments long before Dr Mengele. They'd grown up in an intensely militaristic society; had been subjected to military training of the most brutal sort; had been told since they were children to worship their emperor (who was also their commander in chief) and lived in a culture that historically elevated the all too human desire to conform into a semi-religion.

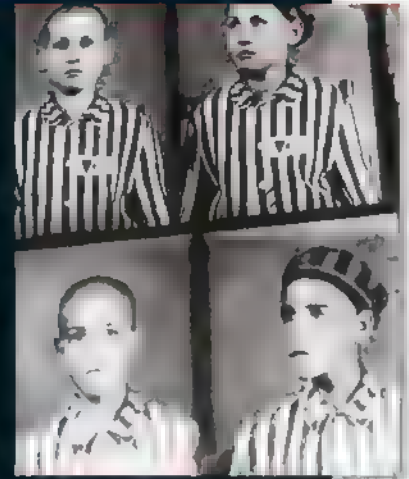
All this was summed up by one veteran who told me that when he'd been asked to take part in the gang rape of a Chinese woman, he saw it less as a sexual act and more as a sign of final acceptance by the group, many of whom had previously bullied him mercilessly. Like the Soviet secret policemen I met, these Japanese veterans attempted to justify their actions almost exclusively with reference to an external source – the regime itself.

Something different appears in the minds of many Nazi war criminals and is encapsulated not just by the character and career of Rudolf Höss but by the interviews we have conducted with members of Nazi killing squads who shot Jews in the Soviet Union. Petras Zelionka, for example, murdered Jews in Lithuania: "You just pressed the trigger and shot," he says, "that was it – it was not a big ceremony. Some did it because of their indignation... the Jews are very selfish". Even today, with the Nazi regime long defeated, they are not sorry for what they did – indeed they almost appear proud of their

## Nasty, brutish and short: The reality of camp life



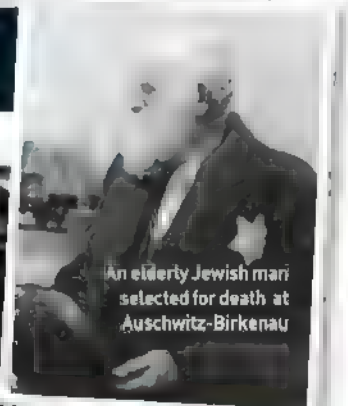
**New arrivals** Hungarian Jews arrive at Auschwitz-Birkenau, June 1944. Höss later admitted that the camp lost count of the number of people murdered there.



**ID photographs** Boys at Auschwitz wearing the striped uniform of the camp, c1940.



**Fit for work** Women prisoners at Auschwitz after being declared 'fit for work' – the registration process included shaving, delousing and disinfecting



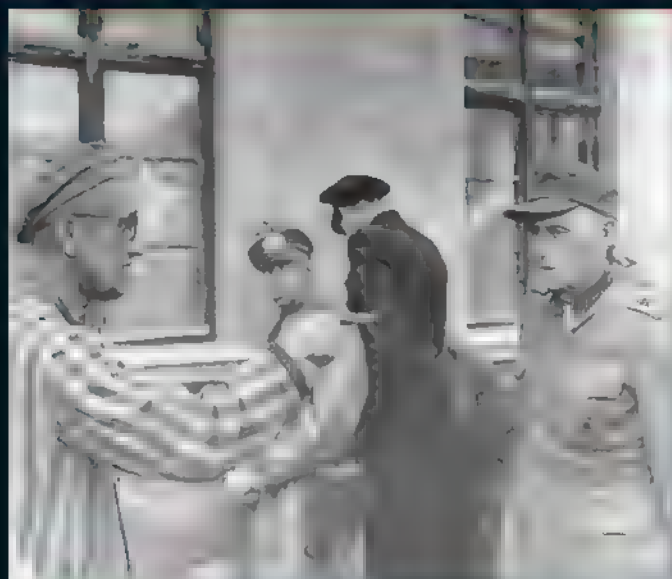
An elderly Jewish man selected for death at Auschwitz-Birkenau

**Unfit for work** Prisoners on their way through Auschwitz-Birkenau to Crematoria V and VI – the 'unfit for work' were sent immediately to their deaths

### Spring, 1942

The first large-scale gassing of Jews in Auschwitz-Birkenau takes place in gas chambers in converted cottages. Eventually four chambers are established

## Camp guards: forced to face up to their crimes

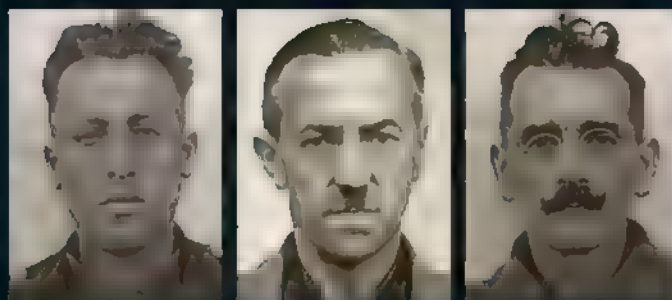


**Retribution** April 1945: a Russian survivor at Buchenwald camp, liberated by the US army, identifies a former guard who brutally beat prisoners



### Violent abuse

Camp guards beat a Jewish prisoner at Cieszanow labour camp in Poland



**Eternal shame** L to r: SS guards Wilhelm Wagner, Johann Kick and Johann Victor Kirsch, all arrested when the camp at Dachau was liberated, 29 April 1945

actions. The easy course would be to hide behind the "acting under orders" or "I was brainwashed by propaganda" excuses, but such is the strength of their own internal conviction that they don't. It's a loathsome, despicable position – but nonetheless an intriguing one. And the contemporary evidence shows that it is not unique.

### Willing participants

At Auschwitz, for example, there is not one case in the records of an SS man being prosecuted for refusing to take

right to kill the Jews, but disagreed with Himmler's policy of not letting them individually profit from the crime. And the penalties for an SS man caught stealing could be draconian – almost certainly worse than for simply refusing to take an active part in the killing.

The history of men like Rudolf Höss and many of his SS colleagues is therefore not one of mindless automatons simply responding to the commands of their masters. It is at once more complex and more troubling. For it reveals that one of the worst crimes in the history of the world was committed – to a large part – not by those touched with obvious lunacy like Amon Göth, but by human beings who calmly and coldly thought through their actions, and then made possible the murder of millions. That knowledge alone makes this a history that should be studied now and in the future – a warning for us and for those who will come after. **11**

**Laurence Rees** is a filmmaker and author of *The Dark Charisma of Adolf Hitler* (Ebury, 2012) and *World War Two: Behind Closed Doors* (BBC Books, 2009)

**With the Nazi regime long defeated, they are not sorry for what they did – indeed they almost appear proud**

part in the killings, while there is plenty of material showing that the real discipline problem in the camp – from the point of view of the SS leadership – was theft. There were even suspicions that Höss himself was personally benefiting from the murders. The SS at the camp thus appear to have agreed with the Nazi leadership that it was

### JOURNEYS

#### Read

► **Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution** by Laurence Rees (BBC Books, 2005)

► **Commandant of Auschwitz** by Rudolf Höss (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1959)

#### Places to visit

► **Holocaust Exhibition**, Imperial War Museum, London, Tel 020 7416 5000 [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk)

► **National Holocaust Centre and Museum**, Nottingham Tel 01623 836627, [www.nationalholocaustcentre.net](http://www.nationalholocaustcentre.net)

► **Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum**, Oswiecim, Poland, <http://auschwitz.org/en/>

#### Web site

This feature was published to accompany the BBC Two TV series *Auschwitz*. Read more about **genocide under the Nazis** on the BBC's history website at [www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/genocide/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/genocide/)



### March 1944

Hitler orders the occupation of Hungary. Adolf Eichmann begins Jewish deportations

### May to July 1944

The most frenzied period of killing in the history of Auschwitz. More than 300,000 Hungarian Jews are murdered in a ten-week period

### 2 August 1944

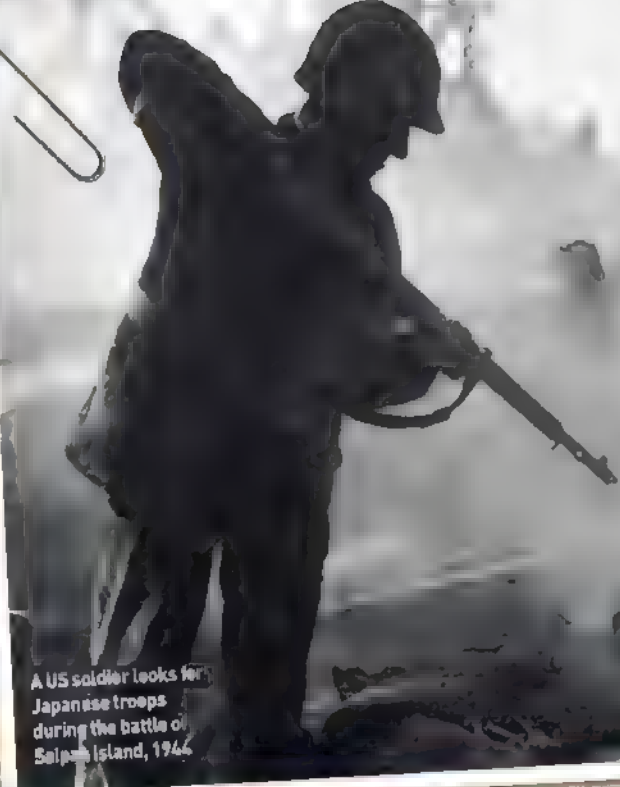
The gypsy camp at Auschwitz is liquidated. At Auschwitz more than 20,000 gypsies are killed altogether



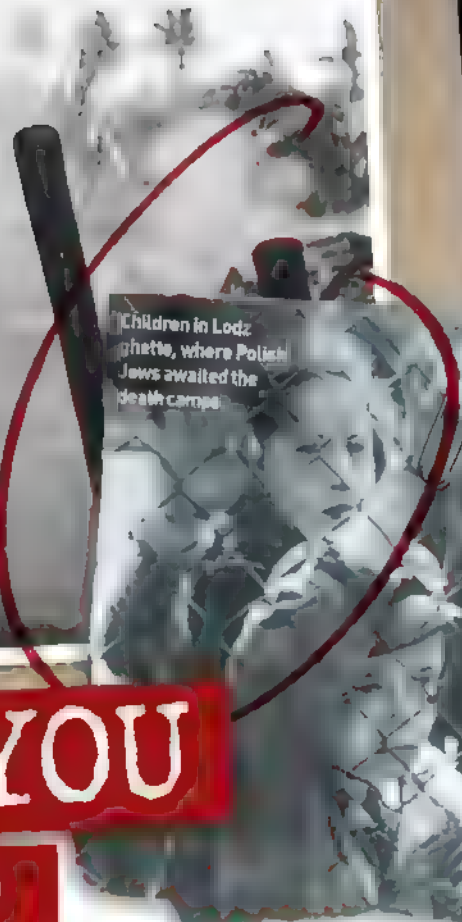
### 27 January 1945

The Red Army liberates Auschwitz but 60,000 prisoners had been force-marched west (the 'Death March') to be sent to other camps





A US soldier looks for Japanese troops during the battle of Iwo Jima, 1945



Children in Lodz ghetto, where Polish Jews awaited the death camps

# WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE?

**Laurence Rees**, after interviewing people who faced terrible Second World War choices, asks what we can learn from these individuals' darkest hours

**H**OW COULD Japanese airmen 'volunteer' to become Kamikaze pilots? Why did the SS believe the Nazi state's racist values?

For over 25 years I have tried to answer such questions by meeting hundreds of people from the Second World War. I was interested in what motivated the perpetrators, but I also encountered victims confronted with awful choices.

I travelled across the world; met rapists, murderers and cannibals; talked to heroic soldiers, survivors of atrocities and a man who shot children. I used some of this material in a number of TV series that I wrote and produced (including *Nazis: a Warning from History* and *Auschwitz:*

*the Nazis and the Final Solution*), but a great deal of material has never been published. So I wrote a book, *Their Darkest Hour*, about the 35 most extraordinary people I met on my travels.

**I encountered murderers and cannibals**

is not some alien world. Certainly circumstances were different from today. But these dilemmas were faced by people who were like us in many fundamental ways, and I believe we can thus learn more about ourselves by asking a simple question: "What would we have done?"

It was vital to treat the oral testimonies we gathered with an element of scepticism. We researched

all interviewees thoroughly, and checked that the facts they provided were consistent with documents of the period, such as military unit war diaries. If we had any doubts then we excluded the interviewee.

Then there's the question of how much we can expect human beings to recall. If you interview someone about what seems to them insignificant details, their recollections will be unreliable. But if you focus on key emotional moments then people have very powerful and accurate recall.

Historians must ask questions of all source material, and oral testimony is no exception. But it's important to remember that documents are capable of lying as much as people.

Above all, I found oral testimony allows us not just to reach intimately back into history, but to powerfully interrogate the past, in search of what all historians seek – understanding.

**Laurence Rees** is a writer and filmmaker whose work includes the BBC documentary *World War II: Behind Closed Doors* and *Their Darkest Hour* (Ebury, 2008)

# CHOSE LIFE OR DEATH FOR JEWISH CHILDREN

As a teenager **Estera Frenkiel**, a secretary in a Lodz ghetto, was given ten certificates excusing Jews from the death camps

**A**T THE heart of many of the stories I encountered lay a stark choice. Whether to pull the trigger, drop the bomb, hide your neighbour or save yourself; to die for your principles or live by expediency.

I've met people who confronted all of these issues, but no one faced a more stark problem than Polish woman Estera Frenkiel. She had to make a devastating choice – who should live and who should die.

In the spring of 1940 Estera Frenkiel and her parents were among the 160,000 Jews forced by the Nazis into a ghetto in the Polish city of Lodz. Germans seldom entered the ghetto, so the Nazis made the Jews establish a council of elders to deal with daily administration.

This meant that the Jewish Council of Elders in Lodz, and especially its chairman, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, possessed considerable power over the lives of their fellow Jews. It also meant that those close to Rumkowski could live a 'better' life than the majority in the ghetto.

The teenage Estera Frenkiel – in the context of the privations of the ghetto – was 'fortunate', since she worked as a junior secretary in Rumkowski's office. This was to be of crucial importance in

September 1942 when the Nazis ordered the deportation of all those people unable to work – the children, the sick and the elderly – because Rumkowski and those close to him were given the opportunity by the Nazis to save their own offspring: "Biebow [the Nazi ghetto manager] came to our office," said Estera Frenkiel, "and said 'I shall give you ten release forms for the release of your children'. And quickly as I could, I typed them up on my machine so that he could sign them. Not only I got these forms, but my colleagues did as well."

Estera Frenkiel now had the chance to save ten lives. Who would she choose? How much would she agonise over this terrible choice?

She didn't agonise for a second. She acted purely by instinct: "What could I do? I also had close family.

I had an uncle who had to be saved. I had a cousin. To me, one's own family is always closer. I had to take care of them all; out of these ten certificates I had first to consider my own relatives... in these cases tears are shed, but when there are so many tears, then one thinks only of one's own situation."

Having saved her own relatives, she then turned to the people closest to her. "I gave the neighbours two certificates

and also gave the caretaker, who had a little girl, one as well, so that these three release forms were used up almost immediately... The children [of the neighbour] used to come to my home, to my flat. I knew them. They weren't my children, but they were children I had known and once one knows someone, it gets very difficult.."

Estera Frenkiel has never pretended that she was driven by anything other than a desire to protect those nearest to her. She did confess that she experienced a "guilty conscience" when she saw the despair of mothers whose children had been deported. Once or twice she felt she should have saved the most useful people but these feelings didn't last very long. Ultimately, she was never shaken from the belief that she had done the right thing. In crisis, she believed, we look after ourselves and those closest to us first.

In any event, the certificates brought only a stay of execution. "Later," she said, "everyone was sent away whom one had previously rescued. That's how it is. That's the reality."

After the Lodz ghetto was liquidated by the Nazis in 1944, Estera Frenkiel was transported to Ravensbruck

concentration camp. Here she survived a 'selection' process and then worked in a Nazi labour camp until liberation. After the war she settled in Israel, but returned to Lodz for her filmed interview.

My last memory of this remarkable woman is of her standing defiantly dry-eyed in Lodz cemetery. I remarked to her that she was one of the toughest and most decisive people I had ever met.

"If I wasn't tough and decisive," she replied, "I wouldn't be standing here today".



Polish police and Jewish ghetto police check papers at the entrance to the Lodz ghetto

In a crisis we look after those closest



Children in the Lodz ghetto



# SURVIVED AS A JAPANESE POW

**Peter Lee** was a young RAF officer. Imprisoned in Borneo, he had to cope with hunger, beatings and sickness

**T**HE NORTH of England and a solid working-class background was what made Peter Lee. The values he absorbed growing up in the 1930s helped him face one of the worst experiences of the Second World War – imprisonment by the Japanese.

He was incarcerated at Sandakan in Borneo. The Japanese wanted an airport, and the prisoners of war were to build it. The heat at the site was intense. When I filmed there, the fierce sun and humidity were scarcely bearable – and I was not malnourished and forced to carry heavy loads. "It was basically shifting earth," recalled Lee. "There were no machines to assist. It was all human labour."

If the prisoners did not work as the Japanese wanted, they were beaten. Special Japanese soldiers, known as "the bashers", smashed the British about. "Whether you were an officer or another rank you had to obey the orders of the lowest-rank Japanese private. If you didn't obey immediately, depending on the personality of that soldier, you'd get a crack over the head or a crack over the backside with a stick. There was one occasion on which a [British] officer intervened when one of his men was

being beaten up by some Japanese guards and he was horribly beaten up by quite a number of them."

All of which led Lee to this conclusion: "My considered opinion, over the whole range of our experience, was that the Japanese treatment of prisoners of war was brutal, sadistic and uncivilised."

So, given all that, how did he manage to survive? "The natural emotion is anger. That's the natural emotion of anyone – any reasonable person. If they're attacked it's to defend themselves. But as a prisoner of war of the Japanese you very quickly realised that was not on. If you attempted to defend yourself you were bashed senseless... And the law of survival comes in. You have to realise the situation you're in and order your actions according to that situation. In other words, you have to take it. In the old British phrase, you have to 'grin and bear it'."

Lee sat in front of me as he said this, looking like a well-turned-out schoolmaster. It was hard to imagine him sweating and steaming in Sandakan. But then I realised that while he would, of course, have sweated, he would never have steamed. Not for him the intense expression of personal emotions proselytised by the 'Me' generation in the 1960s. No, by an exercise of

phenomenal self discipline, he had banished hatred and even anger from his emotional make-up.

And he didn't just eliminate hatred and anger at Sandakan, he excised

another 'negative' force, self-pity. He saw that it was a "positive disadvantage to have that frame of mind. The best thing you could

do was to think of ways of assisting the community... in those circumstances, keep your mind and body occupied as much as you can and don't mope about and never feel sorry for yourself".

Lee believed it was vital to focus only on "living in the present – to take the situation as it was, not as I wished it to be... There was no point in reminiscing about the past – about your family, about your friends, because the past was the past and all you did if you reflected on the past in relation to the horrible present was to torture yourself".

And so he took what he could from each moment – even finding positives: "We were fortunate that many people had gone into prison camps with books and we passed them around. So if you had a spare moment you'd read a book."

It wasn't that he denied the harsh realities; rather that he chose not to focus upon them. His strength of mind, his stoicism and his toughness became his protection against self-pity and physical and mental decline.

It was these 'old-fashioned' values that helped him survive the horror.

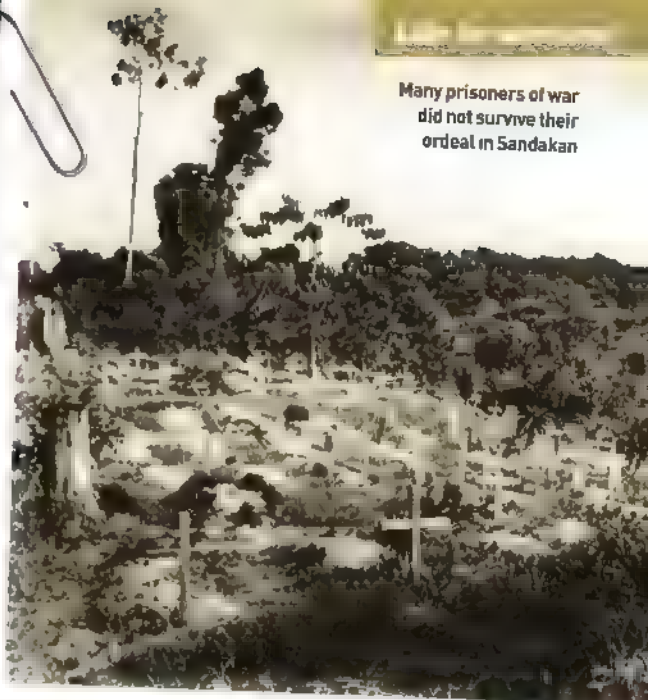
In those circumstances you keep busy

Two rescued soldiers from Formosa POW camp on board the USS Black Island in 1945

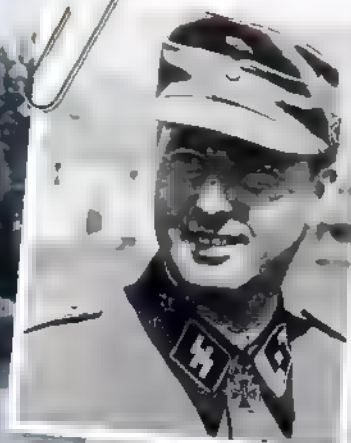


AUSTRALIA WAR MEMORIAL 2007 BETTY IMAGES

Many prisoners of war did not survive their ordeal in Sandakan



PETER LEE



Wallon volunteers are sworn into the Waffen SS in 1941. The flag shows the symbol of the Rexist movement led by Belgian Léon Degrelle (above)

## VOLUNTEERED TO FIGHT FOR THE SS

Even though he had lost an eye and an arm, **Jacques Leroy** decided to fight again with comrades in "their hour of need"

**I**N POPULAR culture the link between Germany and Nazism is explicit. Not everyone realises that Nazism and fascism appealed to many non-Germans. Indeed, the most fanatical member of the SS that I met was Belgian.

Jacques Leroy was brought up in Bache in Wallonia, the French-speaking part of Belgium. During his youth he subscribed to the views of Léon Degrelle, leader of the fascist Rexist party. And so, racist and deeply anti communist, it's no surprise that he volunteered to fight Stalin in a special Walloon division within the SS.

"The ideological aim of the Waffen SS

was to train men – elite men," said Leroy.

"This word is no longer appreciated in our multi pluralist society, but it was to train men who could take over a command and serve their country." The purpose was clear. "It was the war against Russia, against communist and Bolshevik Russia, that was the motive for everything."

Leroy and the rest of the volunteers in the Fifth SS Volunteer Sturmbrigade

Wallonien were transferred to the eastern front. Leroy proved himself a fierce and brave fighter: "One fought with weapons, one hid behind trees, one fought hand-to-hand." He won a special medal for courage in hand-to-hand-fighting.

But, in the snow of the forest of Teklino in the west of Ukraine in 1943, they faced a Red Army force that massively outnumbered them – with disastrous consequences: "These fights were truly terrible. We lost 60 per cent of our men. Two or three panzer tanks were there to protect us, but they couldn't get into the forest." As he remembered these events, Leroy became animated: "We

fought like lions! We attacked and we took position after position!"

But then Leroy's luck evaporated.

"I was kneeling

behind a birch tree quite a slim tree and then suddenly I felt something like an electric shock. I dropped my weapon, I dropped it and at that moment I saw blood, blood dripping into the snow. It was my eye which had been hit by a bullet, which burned it. And [I had] three

bullets in my shoulder." Leroy lay bleeding in the snow until two of his comrades carried him to a field hospital. Surgeons failed to save his eye or his arm.

And now we come to the extraordinary part of his story. For, badly disabled as he was, he rejoined his unit. Why?

"So as not to fall into mediocrity, and to stay with my comrades," Leroy answered. "Of course I had lost an arm and an eye, but when young, one isn't affected by troubles in the same way that an older person might be. And, above all, so as not to fall into mediocrity. I don't like mediocrity. I don't like doing nothing, being idle and not having any aim in life... Sometimes you have to be a symbol in life. Otherwise what is your life for? Life is not about watching television all the time! You have to think, you must have a goal." (Ironically, Leroy's house had a huge television set, and he clearly spent a great deal of time watching it.)

Leroy emphatically denied seeing any atrocities committed against the Jews: "Never, never, never, never! I have never seen a scene like that, that's why I don't believe it, I don't believe it! You know, the answers that I'm giving you, it could be serious for me because you have to feel sympathy towards them these days."

When I pointed out that there was photographic evidence of dead bodies at Nazi concentration camps, he said: "And you really believe these pictures are true?"

Leroy died shortly after our interview. I'm sure he went to his grave consistent to the last, a fanatical former member of the SS, denying the reality of the Holocaust, and shouting at his TV whenever it told him the truth.

**He went to his grave denying the Holocaust**



# KILLED A GERMAN PRISONER

Having joined SMERSH, the notorious Soviet counter-intelligence unit, **Zinaida Pytkina** was expected to kill a German prisoner

**A**T FIRST glance, as she sat huddled in her rickety little house in Volgograd, Zinaida Pytkina looked like a typical Russian granny. She was, after all, in her late 70s when I met her. However the directness of her stare was at odds with her age. This was a woman who unemotionally appraised everyone she met – and appeared to find most of them wanting.

She had been an officer in SMERSH, the secret Soviet intelligence unit so loved by thriller writers, and she had specialised in gathering intelligence from German prisoners. These captured Germans, claimed Pytkina, were not ordinary prisoners of war since they'd been taken by Soviet snatch squads. As a result of this, SMERSH operatives felt they could treat them as they liked. German soldiers were ordered to reveal their units, their mission, battle plans, the names of their commanders. And if they didn't co-operate to the satisfaction of their captors, said Pytkina, they were treated "gently".

"Gently" was her way of describing torture; because if the Germans didn't talk then a "specialist" was brought in who would "give them a wash" (the

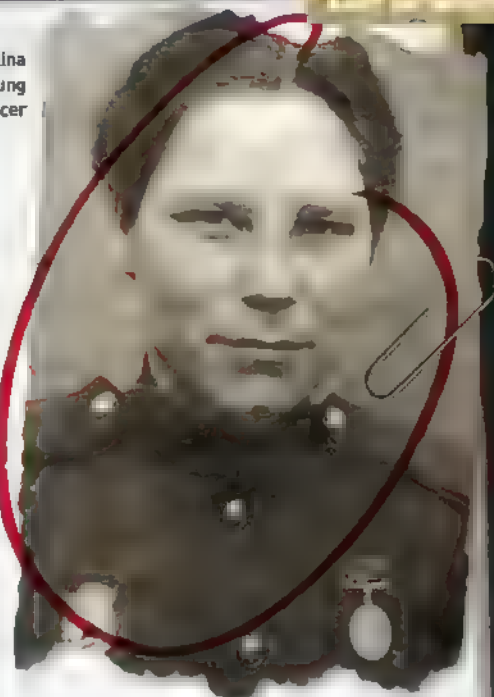
SMERSH euphemism for a beating) to make them "sing". After all, said Pytkina: "No one wants to die".

Even today, Pytkina was proud of the actions of SMERSH. She thinks it was right to treat German prisoners "the same way they treated us – what should we do – worship him? He kills our soldiers, what should I do?"

She didn't just witness the interrogation and torture of German soldiers, she personally participated in their murder.

One day her superior officer told her to "sort out" a young German major. She knew exactly what that meant – she was being asked to kill him. "When they brought prisoners after the interrogations, it was a normal thing to do... If they had brought a dozen of them my hand wouldn't have trembled to shoot them all... He had to be destroyed – the same way they treated us; we had to treat them the same way... Now I wouldn't do it whether he was an enemy or not, because I have got over it and I would leave it to others to sort things out, but at that time if they had lined up all those Germans I would have shot them all down, because so many Russian soldiers lost their lives at the age of 18, 19 or 20 who hadn't lived, who had

**We had to treat  
them the way  
they treated us**



to go and fight against the Germans because they just wanted more land. What would you have felt?"

Pytkina was almost ecstatic as she raised her pistol to shoot the young German major. "I felt joy... My hand didn't tremble when I killed him... The Germans didn't ask us to spare them. They knew they were guilty and I was angry. I was seeing an enemy and my father and uncles, mothers and brothers, died because of them".

She didn't look down as his body tumbled into the pit: "I was pleased. I had fulfilled my task. I went into the office and had a drink.

"I understand the interest in how a woman can kill a man," said Pytkina towards the end of the interview. "I wouldn't do it now. Well, I would do it only if there was a war and if I saw once more what I had seen during that war, then I would probably do it again... One person less I thought. Ask him how many people he killed – did he not think about this? I wanted to go on a reconnaissance mission, to crawl to the enemy's side and to capture a prisoner, perhaps kill him. I could have been killed too... that was my mood... and now if an enemy attacks I will do the same."

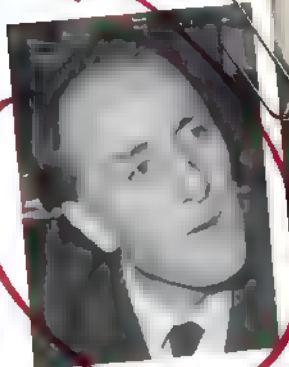
That night I dreamt about the story I had just heard. I saw the body of the major decaying in the pit and Pytkina and her friends partying nearby.

Perhaps the nightmare was inspired by the last words Pytkina spoke in her interview: "People like him [the young major she shot] had killed many Russian soldiers... should I have kissed him for that?"



Our heavy prisoners  
of war await their  
fate in 1945

Nigel Nicolson (below) knew only too well what Tito and his staff had planned for Croatian deportees



## FALSIFIED YUGOSLAV HANDOVER TO TITO

British intelligence officer **Nigel Nicolson** was told to lie about the likely fate of Croats handed over to Tito's partisans. Could he obey orders and still find a way of telling the truth?

**M**ANY PEOPLE prefer studying historical documents to questioning people who actually participated in historical events. "Interviewees can be so unreliable," they say, so "trust the documents." Whenever anyone says this I think of Nigel Nicolson, who revealed the danger of believing that any historical source is inherently accurate.

In the summer of 1945, Nigel Nicolson, a 28-year-old intelligence officer to the First Guards Brigade, participated in the deportation of thousands of Yugoslav soldiers who had sought refuge in southern Austria from the communist Marshal Tito and his partisans.

Winston Churchill's policy was clear: they should not be handed over to Tito. Yet senior officers in the British army decided that they should be handed over, against Allied policy.

Nigel Nicolson's daily Sit Rep (Situation Report) recorded on 18 May, the eve of the forced repatriation, makes interesting reading: "About 2,000 Croats [non-Tito Yugoslavs] are being evacuated tomorrow morning from two large camps on the northern shore of the Wörther See... among whom are many women and children... The Croats have been given no warning of their fate and are being allowed to believe that their destination is not

Yugoslavia but Italy until the actual moment of their handover. The whole business is most unsavoury and British troops [troops] have the utmost distaste in carrying out the orders. At the moment it is not known what higher policy lies behind the decision."

The report was circulated to battalion and upwards to division. "There was the most frightful row," said

Nicolson. "I was sent for by the general or his chief of staff and told that, whatever truth there was in this, I should never have stated it in a public document and, further than that, I was told, and it was more or less dictated to me, that in the next day's situation report I must deny what I'd written the day before and say that we have every reason to believe that they would be well treated once they got to Yugoslavia. That was totally untrue."

And so after a day of handing over the non-Tito troops to the communists, Nigel Nicolson wrote this on 19 May: "The transfer was efficiently organised by 3 WG [the Welsh guards unit involved] and the Tito major, the latter showing considerable tact in clearing away all Tito soldiers from the area with

the exception of himself. First impressions of the reception accorded to the Croats was definitely good. They were kindly and efficiently handled and provided with light refreshments before continuing their journey by train into Jugo-Slavia. A Tito representative said that only the war criminals among them would be punished, and the remainder sent to work on their farms. We have every reason to believe that this policy which accords with previous practice of Tito's men, will be faithfully carried out."

This daily Situation Report of 19 May is a significant document. Nigel Nicolson told me that he had used deliberately ludicrous language to make it clear to anyone subsequently reading the

document that it was a piece of fiction. After all, he said to me, who could believe that Tito's bloodthirsty communists would

**I was told I must deny what I'd written**

provide "light refreshments"?

But Nicolson's subterfuge didn't work. I know of at least one historian who took the document at face value and used it to try and prove that Tito's partisans had behaved responsibly when presented with enemy prisoners.

The fate of many of the anti-Tito troops handed over to the communists by Nigel Nicolson and the rest of 5 Corps was horrific. Thousands were murdered in the forest of Kocëve in Slovenia.

We are lucky that Nigel Nicolson admitted before he died in 2004 that he had lied in his Situation Report. If he hadn't, the precise nature and detail of this appalling action would be obscured. His fictitious report would rest quietly in the archives, ready to lie to future generations.

BE ITMAN/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES





The young pilot felt he had no choice but to fly

# ACCEPTED A MISSION OF CERTAIN DEATH

Japanese pilot **Kenichiro Oonuki** was asked if he wanted to become a Kamikaze and fly his aircraft into an Allied warship

**T**HE TARGET Kenichiro Oonuki flew towards on 5 April 1945 was an Allied fleet off the Japanese island of Okinawa. His mission was simple: to smash his fighter plane, laden with high explosives, into an Allied warship. He would blow himself into a million pieces, and also, he was told, become a kind of god. For Oonuki was one of the infamous warriors of the Second World War – a Kamikaze.

These Japanese suicide pilots were called “madmen” by the Allied servicemen who faced them. In war the belief that one’s foe is insane unites everyone around a common goal.

But the Kamikaze weren’t mad at all. A study of Japanese history reveals that, paradoxically, the only ‘inscrutable’ Japanese were probably the tiny number who – when asked – didn’t volunteer to become Kamikazes.

In the autumn of 1944, a senior Japanese air force officer visited Oonuki’s training base, seeking “volunteers” for a “special mission”. He made it clear that anyone who volunteered had no hope of surviving. Oonuki and his comrades were told to

think it over and then, the next morning, give one of three responses – “No”, “Yes”, or “Yes, I volunteer with all my heart”.

The immediate reaction was predictable. “We were taken aback,” said Oonuki, “I felt it was not the type of mission I would willingly apply for”.

But, as the night wore on, they thought about what might happen if they said “No”. They might be accused of cowardice and be ostracised; their

relatives shunned.

Apart from a brief period at the end of the 19th century and start of the 20th, Japan had been one of the most culturally insular

countries in the world. The government that had come to power in the 1930s had called for a return to the ‘traditional values’ that existed before contact with the west. So in 1944, for anyone to be excluded from a cultural group they had been told for years was acceptable was a terrible humiliation.

Then Oonuki and his friends realised those who didn’t come forward could be “sent to the forefront of the most severe battle and meet a sure death anyway”.

Surely, on reflection, the easiest action was to “volunteer with all my heart” as

Oonuki and all the other pilots on his course did. “Probably it’s unthinkable in the current days of peace,” said Oonuki. “Nobody wanted to, but everybody said ‘Yes, with all my heart’. That was the surrounding atmosphere. We could not resist.”

It would have taken an exceptional person to withstand this pressure. Propaganda trumpeted that the Kamikaze were heroes – they would receive a ‘promotion’, their families would get a bigger pension after their death. They would be gods. Their souls would live in Tokyo’s Yasukuni shrine where the emperor would worship them.

Oonuki survived because his plane was forced to land by American fighters. He was not pleased: “It was dishonour; the special mission attack means you must meet an honourable death”.


Judged without knowledge of this background, Oonuki’s experience is a straightforward example of the insane behaviour of the Japanese during the Second World War. Yet on closer examination it was anything but irrational: “We were very calm and we went through a very calm, dispassionate process of analysis [before agreeing to take part]”.

Indeed, as Oonuki saw it, sometimes the only sane choice is to take the option others consider mad. **11**

Sometimes the same choice is the mad one

A US aircraft carrier in the aftermath of an attack by a Kamikaze fighter





**"You have nothing to worry about. It'll be a holiday really, in the sun"**

**What Yorkshireman Geoffrey Smith was told before the invasion of Italy**

#### **Through the rubble**

British infantrymen advance through the ruins of Cassino in 1944. The Italian town saw some of the fiercest fighting of WWII

PA 40992 / AP Photo / War Museum



# D-Day Dodgers

It was supposed to be a walkover, a holiday in the sun. But as **Matthew Parker** explains, unfriendly terrain and determined German resistance made Monte Cassino a hell on Earth for the Allied troops

**W**HEN A LIEUTENANT in the Scots Guards first clapped eyes on Monte Cassino at the start of 1944, he glumly noted: "Impregnable mountains, obviously with armies of Boche. Vast mountains lie in front, bleak and sinister."

His premonitions were to prove correct. Cassino was the bitterest and bloodiest of the western Allies' struggles with the German Wehrmacht on any front of the Second World War. Many Germans compared it unfavourably with the vicious battle of Stalingrad.

South of Rome, fast-flowing rivers alternate with high mountains. There was only one feasible route north to the Italian capital for the Allies – the old Via Casilina. Eighty miles south of Rome, it passes up the narrow valley of the Liri river. Towering over the entrance to the valley is the monastery of Monte Cassino, its huge walls perched on the top of a mountain spur which rises almost vertically from the valley below, where rivers formed a natural moat around it. This natural strategic stronghold was where the German commander, Field Marshal Kesselring, chose to make his stand.

The Cassino Massif on which the monastery stood was the key position in the German's Gustav Line, the system of interlocking defences that ran all the way across the narrowest part of Italy, south of Rome. The Germans had been defending the mountains south of Cassino ➤

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fiercely enough to exhaust the attackers, but at the Gustav Line, Hitler had decreed, there would be no more retreat in Italy. There had been plenty of time to prepare the defences; Kesselring was confident that "the British and Americans would break their teeth on it".

The Allies dominated sea and air, and had an overwhelming superiority in tanks, but hostile terrain and terrible weather made such advantages useless. The line could only be broken by infantry and the battle would be man-to-man, fought with grenades, bayonets and bare hands. The attackers were aware of the strength of the Cassino position, and to revitalise a stalling campaign, planned an amphibious landing around 50 miles beyond the Gustav Line at Anzio. An offensive at Cassino by Lieutenant-General Mark Clark's multinational Fifth Army would draw the German's strategic reserves away from the landing area and then, it was hoped, break through to meet up with the amphibious force.

In front of Cassino, the Germans had blown dams on the river Rapido and the entire valley was a quagmire. In addition much of the Allies' air support was grounded by foul weather. But the attack had to proceed quickly, not only to satisfy pressure from London and Washington, but also so that the landing craft could be returned to Britain for the Normandy invasion. While the French and British drove forward on either flank, Clark's 36th 'Texas' Division would smash its way up the Liri valley.

River crossings are a recurring nightmare of the Cassino story. To the south of Cassino the Garigliano runs to the coast. Here two British divisions started crossing on the moonlit night of 18 January. When Royal Inniskilling stretcher bearer Jack Williams arrived at his crossing site, all was quiet. "We thought we were going to get over with no trouble at all," he says. The first company started. "No gunfire, no shellfire; and then we went to get over – A Company – everything happened. Mortars, 88s, machine-gun fire, a really heavy stonk. The effect was pandemonium, really. Everybody was flapping and running about, trying to get in the boats, trying to get over."

Williams managed to get across in one of the eight-man boats, but soon all but one of the battalion's 12 craft were damaged. There were

direct hits on crowded boats, and others overturned, throwing their heavily-laden occupants into the icy water. Some loosened their kit and managed to wriggle out and swim to the bank. Others sank like a stone to the bottom. Williams's sergeant told him the next day that as he was swimming, he could feel hands desperately grabbing at his feet from below.

"We got out of the boats," Williams continues, "and straight away we had to get up to our

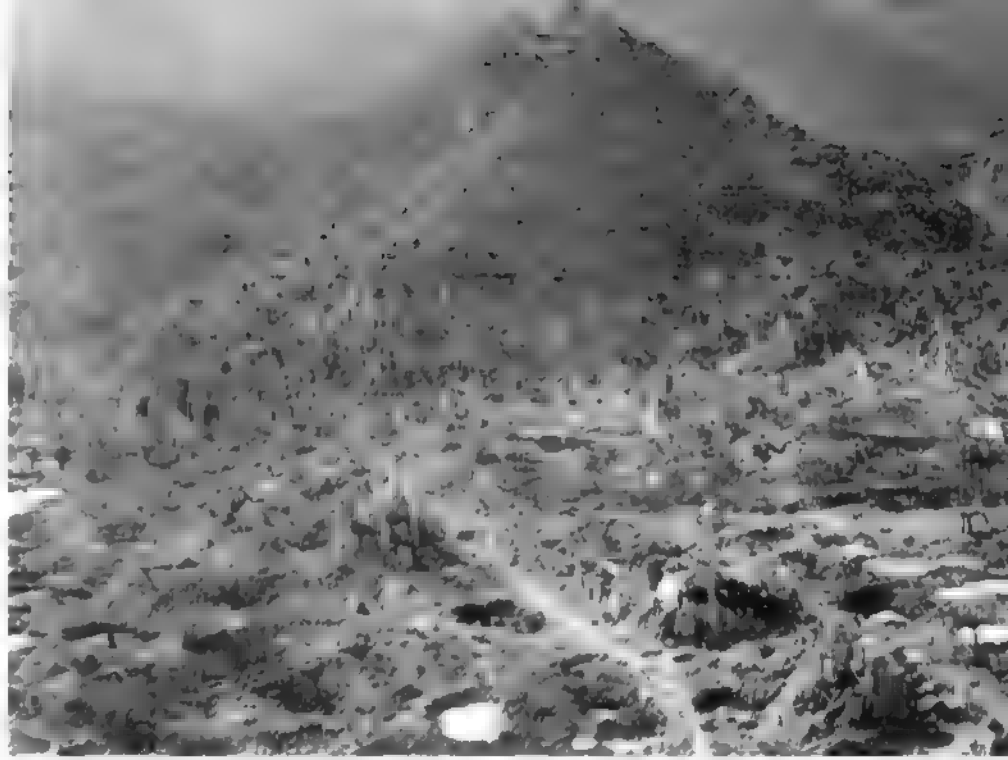
**"If you had a couple of blankets you put one down in the wet hole, laid down, and pulled a wet blanket over you. That's the way you slept"**

objective. We couldn't hang about on the bank, really. We could hear the shouts and screams of the people there who were thrashing about in the water, who had been hit. It was a bit of a do at the time, and everyone was panicking."

Those British soldiers who made it struggled through a massive minefield towards high ground. The German high command were concerned enough to move their reserves south, clearing the way for the Allies' landing at Anzio. Upstream Americans trying to cross the Rapido in front of the Liri valley met with total disaster.

Even before they reached the river, many troops were killed or injured by mines and artillery fire. Carrying heavy boats in the darkness over soggy approaches to the river, some of the men, many 'green' replacements, panicked or quit. Those who reached the river found utter confusion. Rifleman Buddy Autrey tells how his boat was swept downstream. The men inside, paddling furiously, were thrown into the river as the boat capsized. Although weighed down with equipment, Autrey tried to help a young private who was struggling to stay above the water: "Our gear got wet and pulled us under," says Autrey. "I had to let go of the young man and he drowned... eight of twelve of us drowned and four swam to the German side." Wet, cold and without weapons, the four men tried without success to shout back over the river to the Allied side.

Those who made it across were pinned down by strong German defences and efforts



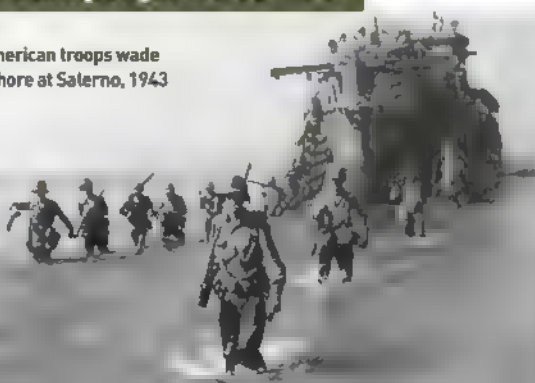
**Wounded wasteland** The town of Cassino after the battle: the devastated landscape reminded one veteran soldier of the wasteland of Passchendaele

## Timeline: The Italian campaign 1943–45

### 9 September 1943

Landing of the main Allied invasion force at **Salerno**. After five days of fierce fighting, the Germans, having inflicted severe casualties, start a **slow withdrawal to the north**

American troops wade ashore at Salerno, 1943



### 1 October 1943

**Naples falls to the Allies.** Comprehensively smashed and looted by the Germans, the city is full of starving civilians. A typhus epidemic ensues and is followed by a severe outbreak of gonorrhoea.

### 13 October 1943

**Italy declares war on Germany.** Due to a shortage of equipment, the Italian army does little fighting, but performs valuable portering duties for the Allies



# BACKGROUND TO THE BATTLE

There was deadlock; the British wanted to fight in the Mediterranean but the US was eager to get started on the cross-Channel assault

"MARSHALL ABSOLUTELY fails to realise what strategic treasures lie at our feet in the Mediterranean, and always hankers after cross-Channel operations. He admits that our object must be to eliminate Italy and yet is always afraid of facing the consequences... He cannot see beyond the tip of his nose and is maddening."

So wrote Sir Alan Brooke, the chief of the Imperial General Staff, effectively Britain's most senior soldier, of his opposite number in the US, George Marshall. At the Casablanca conference in January 1943, as the ring closed around Stalingrad in the east, western Allied leaders met to discuss the next move after the successful African campaign.

The conference saw heated arguments between Britain and the US. The resulting muddle and compromise reached its grim conclusion at Monte Cassino. The road that led to the climactic battles south of Rome in early 1944 started with the decision in July 1942 to commit sizeable American and British resources to north Africa. It had been agreed there were not enough landing craft for a cross-Channel invasion that year. There were also insufficient US soldiers trained and in Europe. Instead of letting existing forces stagnate, it was thought best to use them to clear

north Africa and do at least something to help out the hard-pressed Soviets. Roosevelt was determined there should be American troops fighting Germans somewhere as soon as possible. In November, against the wishes of American military leaders, the president agreed to 'Operation Torch', landings by Americans and British along the north-west coast of Africa. Montgomery's Eighth Army, following their victory at El Alamein the previous month, attacked from the east.

## Ghosts of the Western Front

Marshall had opposed the north African operation as a dispersion of effort. He favoured heading to Berlin from northern France. Now, at Casablanca, he was suspicious that the British desire to strike at the 'soft underbelly of Europe' was motivated by imperial concerns. There may have been some truth to this, but above all, the British were haunted by the ghosts of the Western Front a generation earlier. Churchill was determined to delay cross-channel invasion until success in northern France was more assured.

For once, the British got their way, and the Casablanca conference ended with commitment to the invasion of Sicily. If successful, this would give the Allies control of the Mediterranean, reopen the Gibraltar-Suez shipping lane and, they hoped, knock Italy, then allied to Germany, out of the war. This would draw German troops south, away from the eastern front and France.



The Mediterranean, November 1942 – September 1943

Disagreements continued at the Trident conference in Washington in May 1943. Churchill was forced to abandon his plans to "set the Balkans alight" but the Americans grudgingly allowed Allied planners to work out operations against Italy, Sardinia and Corsica. The Americans thought they had been duped as far as southern Europe was concerned, while the British remained fearful their ally would pull the plug on the Mediterranean theatre, or, even worse, go back on the Germany First policy and remove their forces to fight Japan. Lack of trust at the highest level was mirrored on the ground, where British commanders were scathing of US troops' fighting ability, while American generals despaired of their ally's lack of 'attacking spirit'.

## Standing up for Russia

Presented with early progress during fighting in Sicily, and evidence of Italy's imminent collapse, the Allies worked on their plans for invasion of the mainland. Five days before the Sicily invasion the Germans had launched their Kursk offensive against a 'bulge' in the Soviet line, using nearly

three-quarters of their available strength on the eastern front. There were real concerns that Russia would be knocked out of the war, and might make a separate peace with Germany, a huge blow to the remaining allies.

It was felt that operations in Italy would tie down more enemy troops and an amphibious assault on Naples, which had good landing beaches nearby, was planned as the main attack. This was as far north as land-based fighter aircraft could provide cover for the beaches. Thus the luckless Allied troops found themselves fighting their way up the narrow, mountainous Italian peninsula, perfect defensive terrain. "We have a great need to keep continually engaging them," Churchill was urging at this time. "Even a battle of attrition is better than standing by and watching the Russians fight." The attritional fighting, redolent of the worst moments of the First World War, reached its climax at Cassino where well over 100,000 Allied troops were killed or wounded for no other purpose than to tie down German troops. This was certainly achieved, but the cost must make the victory at Cassino a Pyrrhic one.



Roosevelt and Churchill at the Casablanca conference, 1943

### 17 January–9 February 1944

**The first battle of Cassino:** British X Corps cross the Garigliano. US 36th Division is massacred on the Rapido, US 34th Division attacks the town and Cassino Massif, French north African forces break Gustav Line north of Cassino.

### 22 January 1944

**Anzio landing.** US Sixth Army gets ashore successfully, but digs in rather than pushing on to the Alban Hills. Beachhead is quickly sealed off by German forces.

### 15–18 February 1944

**The second battle of Cassino:** the monastery is bombed, followed by attacks by Fourth Indian Division on Monastery Hill, and by the Maori Battalion of Second New Zealand Infantry Division on Cassino railway station. Both fail.

### New Zealand troops try to make their way through the rubble of Cassino



## Laughing in the face of adversity: The holiday turned to horror

### The D-Day Dodgers

Looking round the hillsides  
through the mist and rain  
See the scattered crosses  
some that bear no name  
Heartbreak and toil  
and suffering gone  
The boys beneath,  
they slumber on  
They are the D-Day Dodgers  
who'll stay in Italy

CONFIDENCE WAS running high among the men of the invasion force as they approached Salerno, south of Naples. Yorkshireman Geoffrey Smith, soon to celebrate his 19th birthday, was an artillery signaller with British 46th Division. In his "first and only encounter with a general" he had been told, "We're going somewhere to do an invasion. You have nothing to worry about. It

will be a piece of cake. You'll land in ankle deep water and wade ashore. It'll be a holiday really, in the sun." Most of the men were happy to be leaving the dirt, months of training, boiling days and freezing nights of Africa behind. There was little seasickness. Major General Fred L. Walker, commander of US 36th Division, wrote in his diary: "The sea is like a mill pond. I hope we have as calm and peaceful a day tomorrow for our work in Salerno Bay... Everyone is cheerful and full of confidence."

As they neared the beaches, the troops on board were told of the armistice with Italy agreed a few days earlier. The news came as a surprise, and the men cheered lustily. "I never again expect to witness such scenes of sheer joy," an American officer reported. "Speculation was rampant... we would dock in Naples harbor unopposed, with an olive branch in one hand and an opera ticket in the other."

After ferocious fighting at Salerno, where the Allies came close to being

driven back into the sea, 'sunny Italy' became a grim joke. As winter closed in, troops suffered from frostbite, exposure and disease. There was an epidemic of desertion among British and American troops, who largely considered themselves civilians in uniform and were contemptuous of rhetoric about God or Country. Their concerns were, as one writer put it, those of the caveman – food, shelter, warmth. Most were sustained by letters from home.

Nothing would upset a front-line infantryman more than not hearing from his loved ones. Many, when they could, wrote two or three letters home a day. Letters gave the troops a window to their old lives; writing was seen as a sane task and retreat into privacy, a way of dealing with boredom. Many letters appealed for reading matter.

As Bill Maudlin says: "Soldiers at the front read K-ration labels... just to be reading something." Even enemy propaganda leaflets would be pored over. Many of those who fought in the



Both sides dropped propaganda leaflets to destroy morale, encourage troops to feign illness or even desert

Italian campaign came to love the country and felt sympathy for the civilians there. Yet no one, however, saw it as an easy posting. As one Eighth Army veteran put it: "This is real war and makes Africa look like a picnic".

to reinforce them failed. After two nights, the battle was over and the only Americans on the Cassino side of the river were now prisoners. It had been entirely one-sided. The 36th Division's fighting strength was gone; US newspapers described it as the worst disaster since Pearl Harbor.

### Continuing offensive

The Anzio landings were virtually unopposed, but Clark had to keep attacking at Cassino to break through to the beachhead before the Germans could counterattack. While urging French North African divisions north of Cassino to keep up the pressure, he ordered his 34th Division to seize the town and monastery. Progress was slow, until a thick fog allowed GIs to slip past German positions and secure high ground behind the abbey. A week of fierce fighting followed as Americans tried to push along the ridge behind the monastery, while the Germans counterattacked hard.

"There was never a time that we weren't free of intermittent or heavy mortar fire," says

American infantryman Don Hoagland. "We took lots of counterattacks... almost always at night, and they came in quietly to get as close as they could. All of a sudden there's bodies moving out there in front of you. Every night there would be another attack... eventually it's fatigue that hits you as much as anything."

As much as enemy fire, it was the conditions that wore out the attackers. On 4 February the weather worsened, and there was heavy snow, increasing the misery of men already soaked by freezing rain. Mortar fire kept the men from sleeping as well as causing casualties. "You'd lay down at night in your shallow hole," remembers Hoagland, "and if you had a couple blankets you put one down in the wet hole, laid down, and pulled a wet blanket over you. That's the way you slept."

When men of the Fourth Indian Division relieved the remnants of the American force on the Cassino Massif, even hardened veterans were shocked. Bodies lay around in various states of mutilation and many survivors were too numb with cold and cramped from

sheltering behind low stone walls to be able to walk. The elite British and Indian soldiers were brought over from Eighth Army to "finish the job".

Speed was of the essence as intelligence indicated a massive German counterattack on the Anzio beachhead planned for 16 February. Originally intended to help the attackers on the Gustav Line, the operation was now dictating the timing of operations at Cassino. The Anzio tail was now wagging the dog.

### Bombing the monastery

On 15 February the ancient monastery of Monte Cassino was attacked by a huge force of heavy bombers. As well as handing the Germans a propaganda coup, the bombing was a tactical error. Because of difficulties in reaching the isolated mountain, the Allies did not have troops ready to follow up. The Germans, who had not been occupying the monastery, now moved into the ruins, which provided an ideal defensive position. When British troops of Fourth Indian Division

### 15–23 March 1944

**The third battle of Cassino:** Cassino town carpet bombed. New Zealand forces and the Fourth Indian Div's on attack the town and the monastery. Eventually two-thirds of the town is in Allied hands, but the road to Rome remains blocked.



### 11 May–5 June 1944

**The fourth battle of Cassino:** A massive artillery bombardment heralds an Allied attack from Cassino to the sea. The monastery is occupied by a Polish patrol on the morning of 18 May.

### 4 June 1944

**American troops in Rome** following Clark's decision to enter the city rather than seal off the escape of German Tenth Army. He parades through the city the next day

General Mark Clark  
(1896–1984)



moved forward that night, they were driven back. The following night a larger force tried again. "The Sepoys went in like tiger cats," reports an eyewitness, "but the hillside, the barbed wire and fierce defensive fire were too much for them. There were many casualties." In the Rapido valley, the Maori battalion of the newly-arrived Second New Zealand Division stormed the railway station but were unable to hold it against German tanks. By the end of the Second Battle, two elite Allied formations had been decimated for no gains whatsoever.

As predicted the Germans launched a massive attack on the Anzio bridgehead on 16 February. This failed by a whisker, but General Alexander, the supreme Allied commander, ordered his men to execute another attack at Cassino. This time, New Zealand troops would capture the town from the north while the Indian Division made an attempt on the monastery from its eastern slopes. But then the weather intervened and the men were kept waiting for three weeks in their forward positions. When the go-ahead was given on 14 March, another massive force of aircraft appeared overhead. Cassino, heavily fortified by the Germans, was to be flattened by wave after wave of bombers.

The town was being held by about 300 men of the German First Parachute Division. "More and more sticks of bombs fell," one reported. "We now realised that they wanted to wipe us out... The sun lost its brightness. An uncanny twilight descended. It was like the end of the world... Comrades were wounded, buried alive, dug out again, eventually buried for the second time. Whole platoons and squads were obliterated by direct hits... Scattered survivors, half crazy from the explosions, reeled about in a daze... until they were hit by an explosion."

Although the town "looked as if it had been raked over by some monster comb and then pounded all over the place by a giant hammer", enough of the elite defenders survived to fight back as New Zealanders picked their way over the rubble and into the town. There followed some of the most vicious fighting of the campaign. "Every method was allowed," says one of the paratroopers. "There was basically



A wounded Indian rifleman is stretchered off the mountain

the rule 'you or me.' On the mountain behind the town, a medieval-style siege was taking place around an old castle, as Indian troops tried to force their way up hairpin bends to the monastery.

After six days the New Zealanders had failed to clear the town and open the way to the Liri valley, and the monastery remained in German hands. The paratroopers, now known as 'The Green Devils of Cassino' had pulled off a remarkable feat. "Unfortunately we are fighting the best soldiers in the world," lamented Alexander. "What men! ... I do not think any other troops could have stood up to it perhaps except those para boys." Their success impressed not only the Allies. In Germany, it had even greater impact. A secret report of the SS Security Service stated that: "The progress of the fighting in Italy is the only thing at the moment that gives us reason to hope that 'We can still manage it'. It has demonstrated that we are equal to far superior adversaries." The monastery of Monte Cassino had assumed a symbolic importance of German resolve and skill.

### The bitter end

It was to be nearly two months before Alexander attacked again and at last some of the lessons of the previous five months seem to have been learnt. This time, there would be no rushed schedule. Instead the Allies were content to wait until they had a massive superiority in numbers and the ground dried out enough to deploy their armour.

On 11 May, a huge bombardment started as Allied troops attacked all the way along the 20-mile front from Cassino to the sea. For the first 24 hours the outcome hung in the balance. A Polish force, made up of men deported by Stalin to Siberia, was beaten back, suffering appalling casualties; in the valley below, efforts failed to bridge the Rapido; to the south, American and French north African forces struggled to win their initial objectives. The next night British engineers, under constant fire, threw a Bailey Bridge over the Rapido as north African mountain troops of the French Corps broke through the mountains to the south of the Liri valley.

There followed a hard week of confused, bloody and attritional fighting. "We've attacked, attacked, attacked from the beginning," British corporal Walter Robson wrote despairingly to his wife, "We sat in holes and trembled. Hicky cracked the day before, now Gordon did... he scrambled in head first, crying 'I can't stand it, I can't stand it. My head, my head.' And he clutched his head and wept. I wiped his forehead, neck and ears with a wet handkerchief and sang to him... When, when, when is this insanity going to stop?"

With the French appearing out of the mountains to their right and faced by overwhelming numbers, the Germans began to retreat. The monastery was never captured. On the point of being surrounded, the weary paratroopers pulled out on the night of 17 May. The next morning a Polish patrol entered the building.

There was little sense of victory among the Allied troops as others took over the chase heading north. "Don't expect normal letters from me because I won't be normal for some time," Walter Robson wrote home to his wife. "The papers are no doubt crowing about us and our achievements, but we aren't. We're bitter, for we've had a hell of a time... Everybody is out on their feet and one bundle of nerves... none of us feel any elation." ■

Matthew Parker is a historian and writer ([www.matthewparker.co.uk](http://www.matthewparker.co.uk))

### JOURNALS

#### Look

► **Monte Cassino** by Matthew Parker (Headline, 2004)

#### Website

Read a feature by Richard Holmes about the Allied leadership of Monte Cassino on the BBC's history website at [www.bbc.co.uk/history/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/)

**BBC** [worldwar2/battle\\_cassino\\_01.shtml](http://worldwar2/battle_cassino_01.shtml)

#### 4 August 1944

German forces withdraw from Florence and start taking up positions on the Gothic Line. French forces and US VI Corps are by now removed from Italy for landing in southern France. Offensive in Italy stalls.

#### 20 October 1944

Winter weather hails operations south of Bologna until the final Allied offensive starts on 5 April 1945.

#### 29 April 1945

German commanders in Italy ask for an armistice. This becomes effective on 2 May.



# D-DAY

Considering how few of the defences had actually been knocked out it was a miracle that the casualties were so light

The Normandy landings and hugely ambitious Allied campaign to take Paris were triumphs punctuated by mistakes and setbacks. **Antony Beevor** talked to **Rob Attar** about the successes and failures of one of the greatest ever military operations



### Was 6 June 1944 a good choice for the Normandy landings?

In a way it was a miraculous choice. Eisenhower [the supreme commander, had a very difficult decision to make but in fact it worked very well. When he took the decision the weather was appalling, with wind and rain battering on the windows. However the Allies had weather stations in the western and northern Atlantic and so were able to see a gap in the weather which the Germans couldn't see. This is why Rommel [commander of the German defences] was away from his headquarters on 6 June, thinking that the Allies wouldn't invade on that day, and why many of the German divisional commanders were at Rennes actually looking at a possibility of doing a command exercise against a landing in Normandy. The Kriegsmarine [German navy] didn't send out any patrols that night because they thought the weather was too bad. In fact the weather wasn't too bad for the landings but it was bad enough for the Germans to have their eyes slightly off the ball

If the Allies hadn't crossed on 6 June they would have needed to postpone

for another two weeks and that would have taken them into the worst storm the channel has seen in over 40 years. One assumes the meteorologists would have been able to pick that up but if not it could have been the most appalling disaster in military history. So the decision to go on 6 June was definitely the right one. It was a brave decision and thank God they said, "Right, let's go!"

### Were the Germans ready to meet the Allied invasion?

They had certainly seen it coming. The whole question for them was whether the landings were going to be in Normandy or in the Pas de Calais region. Plan Fortitude, the Allied deception operation, was perhaps the most brilliant that has ever been devised. It succeeded far beyond what the Allies dared hope in persuading the Germans that Normandy was just the first phase and that the real attack was going to come with a First Army Group led by General Patton in the Pas de Calais. This meant the Germans held back the bulk of their 15th army in the Pas de Calais. Had they not done so the Allies would have faced a very

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So it begins:  
after months  
of preparation,  
the first wave of  
Allied landing craft  
heads towards the  
Normandy beaches  
on D-Day.

difficult time indeed because reinforcement would have been much more rapid. In the event the Germans brought divisions up from central and southern France to meet the invasion, rather than across from the Pas de Calais.

**In your book you explain that the Allied casualties on D-Day itself were significantly lower than anticipated. Why do you think this was?**

It was partly because they took the Germans by surprise and also because the Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine were less effective than they had thought. The RAF and the USAF did an extraordinary job in keeping the Luftwaffe on the ground, with deep patrols right into France. As for Kriegsmarine, it only managed a few attacks by E-boats [torpedo boats]. The Allies had been expecting massive losses of minesweepers because if they had been ambushed by German destroyers they would have been intensely vulnerable. Yet not a single minesweeper was sunk.

The casualties for drowning were not in fact that high and most of the casualties on landing came from landing craft which were turned over or tanks being swamped by the waves. Even on Omaha beach, despite the great American myth, casualties were lower than expected and on the Gold, Juno and Sword beaches the Allies got away very lightly.

**Was the relative lack of casualties on D-Day due more to German shortcomings than Allied success?**

Yes I think that is true. There were in fact failures in the Allied plans, which had depended on knocking out the German defences with shelling and bombing. The Allied shelling from naval artillery went on for too short a period to take out many of the defences. It would also have been much better to have destroyers going in close to bombard rather than having battleships shelling for a couple of hours offshore. The American air commanders said their bombing could be so accurate that it would knock everything out, but the bombing on D-Day was in most places completely wasted. At Omaha for example, the Americans didn't want their bombers to fly along the coast because they would be exposed to flak.



American troops help others ashore at Utah beach during the D-Day landings

Instead they came in over the invasion fleet and of course they were afraid of dropping their bombs on the landing craft so they held on a few seconds more, meaning their bombs fell on open countryside rather than hitting the beaches.

Considering how few of the defences had actually been knocked out by the bombers' assault, it was a miracle that the casualties were so light. It was a nasty shock for many of the invading troops to arrive and find the gun emplacements were still in action.

**Were the Allies well-prepared for the battle for Normandy that followed the D-Day landings?**

The preparations for the crossing of the Channel were the most intense and meticulous that have ever been made

**“Montgomery would have insisted that his master-plan had never changed but then Montgomery could never admit he had been wrong about anything”**

for any operation. However there wasn't much forethought about the second phase and this is where things started to go wrong. The Allies had had a lot of time to prepare but there was this feeling of 'let's get ashore' without a clarity of thinking about the immediate follow-up.

On the British side, General Montgomery's plan was to seize Caen on the first day but the troops needed for such an operation were simply not organised enough in advance. If you are

going to get your troops ten miles inland and capture a whole city in a day, which is a very ambitious task to say the least, you have to make sure that your infantry are mounted in armoured personnel carriers or something like that to keep up with the tanks. The trouble was that the tasks allotted were far more than could be realistically achieved. Then the Germans pushed in their panzer [tank] divisions as quickly as they could and the

two sides found themselves in a battle of attrition. The British were supposed to seize enough land to start building airfields but this became impossible as they didn't have the room. They hadn't advanced far enough.

**Therefore would you say that the British thrust into Normandy did not go as well as planned?**

Montgomery would have insisted that his master-plan had never changed but then Montgomery, often out of quite puerile vanity, could never admit he had been wrong about anything. He had wanted to seize Caen, advance to Falaise and then break through to Paris. That was always the stated objective and either he didn't really plan to do that or he got it badly wrong. I think he probably got it wrong and couldn't admit that when the British were blocked in by German panzer reinforcements.

At this point Montgomery realised that by anchoring the panzer divisions on his front it would give the Americans the chance to break through in the west. It had always been considered a possibility that the Americans would achieve this breakthrough but it was also thought that the British would break through around Falaise. There is however evidence that Montgomery was not prepared to risk such an attempt, knowing the casualties it would cause.

The Americans became very angry about this, feeling that the British weren't making the effort or taking the risks and there is an element of truth in that. There was a bitter anti British feeling among the American commanders over Montgomery's behaviour that contributed to the worst crisis in Anglo-American



# D-DAY 6 JUNE 1944

## How events unfolded on that fateful day

### 00.00 Attack from the air

British and American airborne troops, carried in over 1,000 aircraft, begin to touch down in Normandy to secure key objectives prior to the naval landings. The first to arrive in France are elite pathfinder units who mark out the terrain for their colleagues.

having not yet been appraised of the events in Normandy.

### 04.00 Invaders approach

The fleet of 5,000 ships, holding over 130,000 men, arrives off the coast of Normandy and the soldiers begin to load onto the landing craft that will take them to the five assigned

beaches. "The eyes of the world are upon you," is Supreme Commander Dwight Eisenhower's message to the troops.

### 05.35 A tank disaster

Off Omaha beach 29 swimming tanks are launched but almost all are sunk by the rough seas. Only two make it onto the beach.

### 02.15 The fleet is sighted

Part of the invasion fleet is spotted by the Germans in Cherbourg but the German forces are too preoccupied in vicious battles with the Allied airborne forces to react to this new threat.

### 03.00 Bombing begins

Taking advantage of their air superiority, Allied bombers begin heavy raids against German defences in Normandy. They are shielded from possible attack by formations of fighter aircraft. Meanwhile Hitler goes to bed in his Berghof retreat.

### 06.00 Preparing the beaches

As dawn arrives, US bomber aircraft bombard the landing areas at Utah and Omaha where American troops will be putting ashore. The raids over Omaha are a dismal failure as virtually none of the 13,000 bombs land on the beach.

### 06.30 Troops step ashore

The first US troops disembark on the beaches of Omaha and Utah. The landings at Utah are relatively successful with the defences rapidly overcome but at Omaha German machine guns and choppy waters cause carnage. Back in Germany

Field Marshal Rommel is woken with an urgent report of the invasion. He sets off for France immediately.

### 07.25 The British assault

British and Canadian forces begin to land at Gold and Sword beaches and shortly afterwards at Juno as well. They encounter resistance but are able to make progress against the enemy ranged against them.

### 10.00 Hitler sleeps

Albert Speer arrives at the Berghof to find that Hitler has not yet been woken because the army commanders think the attacks are only diversionary.

### 13.45 Civilian casualties

The RAF begins the systematic bombing of the French town Caen in preparation for its capture by ground troops. Some 800 civilians are killed in the first two days of the air attacks.

### 14.00 Slow progress on Omaha beach

After heavy fighting the first beach exit is cleared by the Americans at Omaha. On the other four landing beaches Allied troops are pushing inland and follow-up troops are arriving.

### 15.00 German counterattacks

Having dithered up to this point Hitler finally decides to order German panzers to counterattack against the invading troops. The delay proves to be costly but the panzers are still able

Allied troops and equipment photographed on D-Day



to impede the invasion's momentum, preventing any notion of the capture of Caen on D-Day.

### 17.21 Relief on Omaha

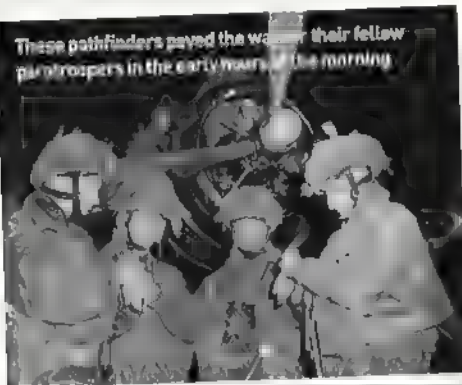
Omaha beach is finally able to accept "wheeled and tracked vehicular traffic" on most of the area below the high-water mark. Relieved, General Gerow heads ashore to set up his headquarters.

### 20.15 Germans repulsed

A German counterattack between the Sword and Juno beaches is halted by the Allies who capture the Hillman strongpoint.

### 24.00 The end of the day

By midnight the Allies have secured all five landing areas, although the beachhead at Omaha remains perilously small. Some 160,000 troops have landed in France by air and sea and the Allies can no longer be dislodged from western Europe.



These paratroopers paved the way for their fellow paratroopers in the early hours of the morning

GETTY IMAGES, ALAMY



British Royal Marine commandos leaving their landing craft at Juno, around 9am

## The battle for Normandy in a nutshell

STALIN HAD BEEN pressurising Britain and America to open up a second front against Hitler in France for some time, and at Tehran in 1943 the **Allies agreed on a cross-channel invasion** the following spring. **General Eisenhower** was appointed supreme commander for the operation which was code named Overlord. In the weeks prior to D-Day the Allies flew hundreds of thousands of air sorties to help prepare the ground, while the **French Resistance** played their part in sabotage and intelligence work.

Hitler realised an invasion was imminent and ordered **Field Marshal Rommel to strengthen the coastal defences**. However brilliant Allied deception plans kept the German high command guessing as to

where the blow would come. The D-Day landings on 6 June 1944 were largely **a success despite the bloodshed** on Omaha beach and once the Allies had secured the beaches the fall of France was seemingly assured. Yet the ensuing fighting proved treacherous as the Allies encountered **stubborn German resistance** and were hampered by difficult terrain. British offensives near Caen in June were pushed back and **a war of attrition developed**. Casualties mounted.

With inferior resources the Germans could not hope to triumph in such a conflict. On 25 July the Americans launched Operation Cobra, under General Bradley, which broke through the German lines, threatening to encircle their forces. The

counterattack, Operation Lüttich, failed, and on 16 August **Hitler accepted the inevitable** and ordered a withdrawal from Normandy. **An uprising began in Paris** three days later, changing Eisenhower's mind about bypassing the city. The supreme commander then permitted Free French forces to spearhead the American attack on their capital. They arrived on 24 August, and the next day **the Germans surrendered Paris**, surrounded by scenes of jubilation.

The battle for Normandy cost the Allies over 220,000 casualties and the Wehrmacht 240,000, plus some 200,000 Germans taken prisoner. Paris and Normandy were liberated but the war in Europe still had another eight months to run.

relations during the whole of the Second World War.

### Do you think there was any way that the British could have got to Paris first?

In the circumstances I think it was unlikely simply because of the concentration of panzer divisions against them. They did nearly break through on a couple of occasions but these attempts were often badly handled. Operation Goodwood (18–20 July), for example, was very poorly planned and

when the tanks charged through it was described as the death ride of the English armoured divisions. There was a catastrophic loss of tanks on the first day. However Goodwood did tie down panzers before the big American launch of Operation Cobra on 25 July and so the American possibility of success there was greatly increased.

### Despite the setbacks, Cobra succeeded and the Allies managed to seize Paris before their stated objective of 90 days after D-Day. What were the key reasons for their victory?

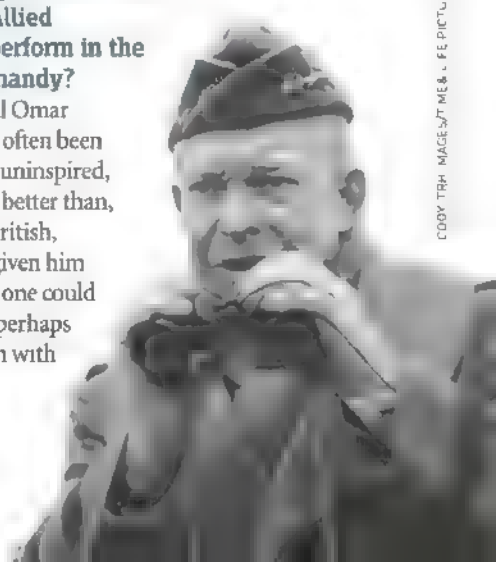
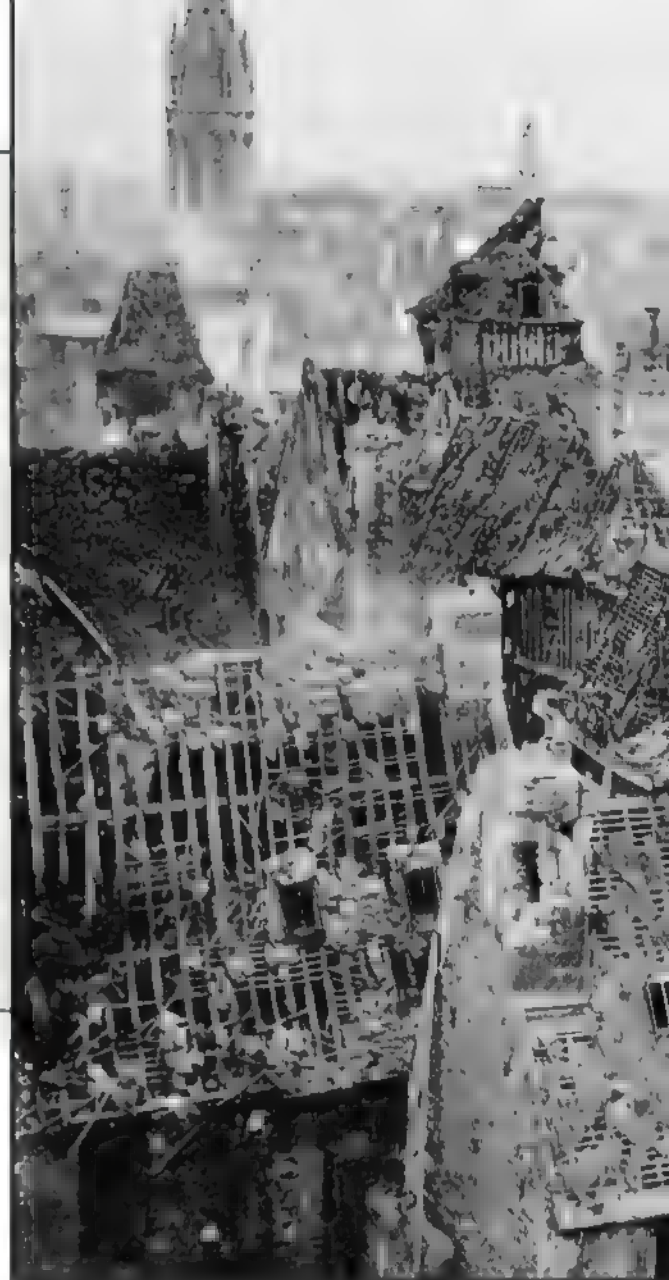
Once they were ashore, Allied victory became inevitable. They had a clear superiority of forces. By the end of August they had landed two million men, while at the same time the German army was being ground down in a battle of attrition. The Allies also had massive artillery and I don't just mean artillery on the ground but also naval artillery which

was able to smash so many counterattacks. They had overwhelming air power. Allied air forces were able to destroy the German resupply system so they were constantly short of rations, fuel and ammunition. This had a huge effect on the German fighting capacity.

### We've discussed Montgomery's failings already, but how well did the other Allied commanders perform in the battle for Normandy?

American general Omar Bradley, who has often been accused of being uninspired, was actually a lot better than, certainly some British, historians have given him credit for. Where one could criticise Bradley perhaps was his obsession with a broad front strategy, ie not

Supreme commander and later US president Dwight Eisenhower in May 1944







The French town of Caen was devastated by British bombing, beginning on D-Day. Unfortunately for British troops, the rubble actually aided the defenders

attacking in individual concentrations but assaulting right the way across the whole of the base of the Cotentin peninsula. This strategy contributed to the large number of American casualties. However Bradley did recognise the necessity for a concentrated attack just west of St Lô for Operation Cobra.

Eisenhower wisely put George Patton in command of the Third Army to make the breakthrough. Patton was the ideal general for this as his leadership, energy and push was just what was needed for one of the most devastating campaigns in history. This didn't make him a nice man but a good ruthless general is not going to be a very nice man and Patton was a pretty demanding commander to put it mildly.

#### What about Eisenhower as supreme commander?

He was heavily criticised by Montgomery both at the time and

afterwards. "Nice chap, no soldier," was Montgomery's view. But Eisenhower actually showed extremely good judgement on all the major issues. One has to acknowledge a huge achievement in keeping such a very disparate alliance together with such conflicting characters. Whether Eisenhower should have taken a more detailed control of events is a question of what you regard as the role of a supreme commander. I think he was quite right to let the commanders make their own decisions, having established an overall strategy.

#### How well did the British and American troops fight in the battle?

This is a big area of debate, particularly among historians. There has recently been a swing back to the view that the British and Canadian troops performed better than people in the past have given

**"Psychiatrists were struck by how few German prisoners were suffering from combat fatigue in comparison to their own side"**



German troops in Normandy, June 1944. Years of indoctrination had made them more fanatical and self-sacrificing than their Allied counterparts

them credit for and I believe there is some truth in that. Yet one has to accept the fact that the armies of democracies could not possibly fight in the same way as those of totalitarian regimes where the degree of indoctrination was simply overwhelming. They were not going to be as fanatical or as self-sacrificing. Both British and American psychiatrists were struck by how few German prisoners were suffering from combat fatigue in comparison to their own side. The Americans for example suffered 30,000 combat fatigue casualties in Normandy.

There were I think flaws in the Allies' training and I believe the Americans learned more on the job than the British did. The British suffered from the regimental system which resulted in a failure to integrate infantry and armour in a way that was necessary for that kind of fighting in northern France. You cannot suddenly put together an infantry battalion and an armoured regiment and expect them to work together. It takes a lot of training and preparation and the British hadn't done that.

#### How do you rate the German defence of Normandy?

It was quite simply brilliant in making use of what they had available. Their infantry divisions on the whole were pretty weak so these were bolstered by

little pockets of tanks, panzer grenadiers and anti-tank guns taken from the panzer divisions. Panzer commanders were appalled about this because their whole military ethos was based on the idea of keeping a division together, but these parcels were extremely effective in the defence of the bocage (an area of dense hedgerow). They were able to inflict considerable casualties on the British and the Americans here by using camouflage and mines and also some very nasty fighting.

And this brings me to a point that I believe has been hugely overlooked in the past: the fighting in Normandy was comparable to that on the Eastern Front. The German casualty rates in the battle for Normandy were 2,300 men per division per month and it was actually lower in the east. The savagery in Normandy was intense and the killing of prisoners on both sides was much greater than has been considered up until now. One has only got to read a lot of accounts of

## “When you go to Normandy today there are cemeteries and memorials everywhere”

American paratroopers; they weren't taking prisoners in many cases. Then there was the British attitude towards SS prisoners which was one of, “I don't think he's going to make it back to the prisoner of war camp...”

**The fighting on the Eastern Front was notorious for civilian casualties. Did this also happen during the battle for Normandy?** There was not deliberate killing of civilians on the Western Front, unlike the east, but civilian casualties were still appalling. One has to face up to the fact that more French were killed in the war by Allied bombing and shelling than British civilians killed by the Luftwaffe and V-bombs. In the bombing beforehand over 15,000 civilians were killed and during the fighting in Normandy there were at least 20,000 French deaths, which is a huge number.



German prisoners in Paris on 25 August 1944, the day that the French capital was surrendered to the Allies

### As a whole, how successful would you say the Allies were in the battle for Normandy?

If you look at it overall it was a triumph in that they secured their stated objective of being on the Seine by D plus 90. From that point of view it was a success but whether they could have avoided many of the mistakes along the way is certainly a matter for debate.

### Was it more the future of postwar Europe than the defeat of the Nazis that was at stake at D-Day?

Yes I believe so. Germany was certainly going to lose the war by that stage and in fact one could have said that a German loss was irreversible from much earlier on. It was very much a question of the postwar world. If, for example, the invasion fleet had sailed into the great storm and been smashed, that might have delayed the invasion until the following spring by which point the Russians could well have been west of the Rhine. This, though, is counterfactual history which is not something I'm keen on.

### The Normandy landings continue to fascinate many people 65 years after D-Day. Why do you think this is?

I think it can easily be explained by the sheer scale and the sheer ambition of the invasion itself. Even though Stalin was bitter about the Allied failure to launch a second front earlier, he had

to acknowledge that it was one of the greatest operations the world has ever seen. The landing of so many thousands of troops on an enemy-occupied country, all in one day, having crossed a very large channel to get there, is unprecedented in history and that is why people remain so interested in it.

When you go to Normandy today there are cemeteries and memorials everywhere and of course museums. I think it must have more museums per square mile than almost any other area of any country in the world. And it's not just British and Americans who visit. You can see from the different registration plates in the car parks the fascination that the battle for Normandy continues to hold for people from all over the world. **■**

**Antony Beevor** is the author of works including *The Second World War* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2012) *Ardenne 1944. Hitler's Last Gamble* (Viking, 2015), *Stalingrad* (Penguin, 2007) and *Berlin The Downfall 1945* (Penguin, 2007)

### JOURNEYS

#### Book

► **D-Day: The Battle for Normandy** by Antony Beevor (Viking, 2009)

#### Website

Read more about the **D-Day landings** on the BBC's history website at [www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/dday\\_beachhead\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/dday_beachhead_01.shtml)





# VE DAY

WHEN WAR TURNED TO PEACE



MORE  
from the  
**BBC**  
▶ page 89

Germany had surrendered, its threat was ended.  
**Juliet Gardiner** talked to those who remembered VE  
Day, including *BBC History Magazine* readers, to find  
out what it really meant to a tired and hungry nation

**A**T 2.41 IN THE morning of 7 May 1945, at a schoolhouse near Reims in northern France, General Alfred Jodl, the German chief of staff, signed the unconditional surrender of all German land, sea and air forces wherever they might be fighting. General Eisenhower, supreme commander of the Allied forces, rang General Sir 'Pug' Ismay, Churchill's chief of staff. "The war is over," he said. But no official announcement could be made. Stalin insisted that victory should not be proclaimed until German troops on the eastern front had surrendered to

production, in her diary for 7 May. "The one o'clock news said news would be through within hours and I was wondering what to do about appointments for the next day... John [her fiancé] wouldn't celebrate until it was official. Tidied up and went home. Mummy said still no news at six o'clock... They seem to be making a mess of this."

Unaware of the diplomatic niceties, the British public felt betrayed. "They shouldn't keep people hanging about waiting like this. The government needn't be afraid of people going mad, everybody's very sober about it," complained a middle-aged man to a member of Mass-Observation, the organisation that compiled reports on British wartime attitudes and morale, which was out in force now that victory was in the air.

Gordon Brown, another *BBC History Magazine* reader, was a child living in a tenement block in Glasgow during the Second World War. His best friend's family had been bombed out during one of the heavy raids on Clydebank, but the Browns "hadn't suffered much". On the evening of 7 May, Gordon heard "some shouting in the road outside and looked out of the window which was criss-crossed with two inch wide Butterfly brand brown sticky paper tape [to stop the glass shattering in case of a bomb blast] to see... a former school mate running along the pavement shouting at the top of his voice 'The war's over, the war's over!' I don't know where he got the news..."

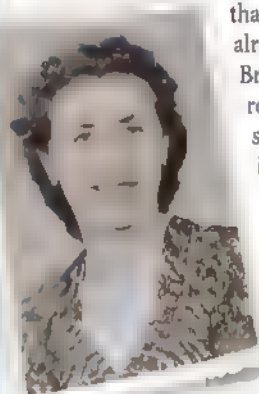
In fact, at 7.40pm, BBC radio programmes had been interrupted by a ponderous message from the Ministry of Information, read by the news reader Stuart Hibberd: "... an official announcement will be broadcast by the

prime minister at three o'clock tomorrow, Tuesday afternoon, 8 May. In view of this fact, tomorrow, Tuesday, will be treated as Victory in Europe

**There were no official plans for VE Day. Notice of the public holiday had been so short that most people weren't sure how to celebrate**

the Soviet general Zhukov in Berlin and the long-awaited news could be proclaimed simultaneously in London, Moscow and Washington. But rumours that the war had finally ended had already begun to filter through to the British public and the *Daily Mail* reported that "twelve elderly men stood... for hours on end, with ropes in their hands and hope in their hearts, waiting to send the bells of St Paul's clanging in the paean of triumph".

"The newspapers are full of rumours of surrender... feeling almost excited... everyone is speculating," wrote *BBC History Magazine* reader Lyn Murphy, who worked for the director of an electrical manufacturer engaged in war



On VE Day Lyn Murphy took a moment of thanks and reflection

'Breaking news': VE Day had already dawned when the newspapers arrived with the announcement on 8 May 1945

Canadian troops celebrate with the crowds in Leicester Square, while waiting for the broadcast of the king's VE Day speech

Day and will be regarded as a holiday. The day following, Wednesday 9 May, will also be a holiday".

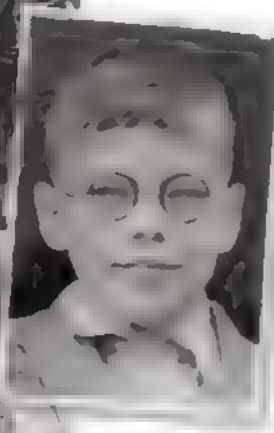
"What a flop," said Nella Last, a housewife who heard the announcement at her home in Barrow-in-Furness. "We could none of us believe our hearing... we felt no pulse quicken, no sense of thankfulness, or uplift of any kind... I rose placidly and put the kettle on..."

"I can't say I'm wildly excited... just a pleasant feeling of 'Well, that's over. What now?'" reported one woman. But *BBC History Magazine* reader Lyn Murphy felt thankful: "people have started to hang flags and bunting out... it really is the end of the war after five years and eight months. The lights are on everywhere. We stood looking out at the sky – and it's strange to think that the last time I stood in a peaceful world I was 19... and although I did not know it, without knowledge of suffering."

### Time for a holiday

There were no official plans for VE Day. Notice of the public holiday had been so short that most weren't sure how to celebrate. A London window cleaner probably spoke for many when he declared "the holiday is the main issue... very few have any definite plans, and these almost exclusively consist of getting drunk". Most people had expected the church bells to be rung. "I





The young Stuart Hands (above) and his uncle planted the Union Jack on a Coventry office's flagpole on VE Day

thought they'd be clanging all day long," reported a Surrey woman, "but there was no signal. Just hanging around... People won't forget this... No All Clears, no bells. Nothing to start people off."

The weather looked set fair – though the papers forecast possible rain later. But even that was a novelty. Throughout the war it had been forbidden to publish the weather forecast in the newspapers or broadcast it on the wireless for fear of giving the Germans information that might be useful in planning bombing raids.

"It was a lovely day... I remember it as if it were yesterday... the apple blossom was out [in Windermere] and it was all such a relief," writes *BBC History Magazine* reader Joyce Openshaw, whose brother had been killed in action in 1942. She was in the WRNS, as was her sister, and had managed to wangle a week's leave to be with her husband who had been fighting out in Burma.

Some people went to church to give thanks for the peace at hastily arranged services while others strolled around their local streets admiring the flags and streamers that had been hung out. May Clark was pleased to discover that "all through the East End the battered little streets are gay with bunting recent V2

damage barely tidied up". In Chepstow there were "flags out in great numbers obviously saved from the Coronation [of George VI in 1936]", while in

**"It was one huge celebration. A tremendous wave of pent-up feelings had broken loose"**

Haverfordwest in Pembrokeshire a local authority worker was struck "by all the flags... the Union Jack and the Welsh Dragon flew side by side on public buildings". In a Scottish village "there were a few flags, mostly Scottish lions, and a pathetic and obviously homemade one on the gate of the poorest family". While in Glasgow, the Grand Hotel, which had been requisitioned by the American Red Cross, flew the Stars and Stripes at half mast as a mark of respect for President Roosevelt who had died suddenly on 12 April. But the Union Jack fluttered above the city at the top of the flag pole.

### Flying the flag

David Blake, a *BBC History Magazine* reader, was not yet six on VE Day, but he and his fellow pupils at the tiny village school in Charsfield, Suffolk, set to work with crayons and carefully hoarded pieces of cardboard. Each



German Army Group C surrenders in Italy, 29 April 1945

## Timeline: How the war was won in 1945

**28 January** The battle of the Bulge Hitler's final counteroffensive in north-west Europe, is won in what Churchill calls "the greatest American battle of the war"

**29 January** Russian troops cross the Polish border and advance into Germany

**4–11 February** The 'Big Three' – Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin – meet at Yalta in the Crimea to negotiate primarily about the shape of the postwar world, in particular the occupation of Germany and Austria and the future of Poland

**13–15 February** Allied bombing of Dresden leaves at least 25,000 dead – including many Jewish forced labourers and migrants fleeing the Russian advance.

**23 March** British, American and Canadian troops cross the Rhine and take Cologne.

**15 April** British troops liberate the Nazi concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. Graves containing 40,000 bodies found as well as 10,000 unburned corpses. Of the 38,500 still alive, only around 10,000 survive

**28 April** Mussolini, his mistress and other fascist leaders shot by Italian partisans. Their bodies are strung up by their heels from a petrol station in Milan's Piazza Loreto

**29 April** Dachau concentration camp near Munich liberated. Of the 225,000 incarcerated there between 1933 and 1945, officially 31,950 – but probably many more – perished.

**30 April** As Russian troops storm the Reichstag in Berlin, less than a mile away Hitler shoots himself in his bunker. Admiral Dönitz, a former U-boat commander, designated by Hitler as his successor.

**1–5 May** German troops in Italy, Austria, Holland, Denmark and Norway surrender.

**7 May** Unconditional surrender of all German forces to the Allies

**8 May** VE Day

**6 and 9 August** America explodes atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Around 140,000 killed

in Hiroshima – at the time or from the effects of radiation. In Nagasaki, 73,884 are killed and roughly the same number seriously injured

**14 August** Emperor Hirohito of Japan announces his country's unconditional surrender. The document is signed on 2 September 1945

**15 August** Allied countries celebrate VJ Day

made a Union Jack which they secured to a stick "and we proceeded to run home, waving our flags in celebration. I'm not sure how much I understood of the significance of that day, at the time, but the war had impinged on our lives, even in rural Suffolk. There was a POW camp in the vicinity, so we often saw prisoners, initially Italian and later German, marching through the village ... and the fact that there were wartime airfields in the area meant we were not entirely immune from air raids".

"Let's go and put a flag up at work," said nine-year-old Stuart Hands' uncle, and putting his nephew on the crossbar of his bike, the two set off to cycle across Coventry. "At his office we put the Union Jack on the flagpole and stood to attention and sang 'God save the king'... we glanced at each other and both of us had tears pouring down our cheeks... Then it was back on our bikes home... through the ruined city centre, past the cathedral, or what Hitler had left of it! [after the devastating raid on Coventry on the night of 14/15 November 1940]. The cathedral was full of people, each rejoicing or remembering in their own way, just as we had done," recalls the *BBC History Magazine* reader.

Michael Mason had been evacuated from his home in central London to a

## "We may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing," announced Churchill on VE Day

village in Hertfordshire on 1 September 1939 and he was still there on 8 May 1945, now aged nearly 13. But on VE Day "I caught the early bus... to London. I wanted to spend the day with my mum and dad. The scenes in the capital were incredible. It was one huge celebration. A tremendous wave of pent-up feelings had broken loose. The streets were crammed with joyful revellers". Jack Conway, another *BBC History Magazine* reader, "set out by bus for the heart of London" too. "The atmosphere was better than any cup final." Millicent Hewlett (née Hutchings) had been working "for the Ministry of Food, one of 'Lord Woolton's young ladies'". On VE Day, she and some friends reckoned that London was the place to be. "My mother had made us red, white

Patriot on two wheels: this man was photographed flying the flag with his child in tow on VE Day



and blue rosettes to wear (I still have mine)... we went up on the underground and got off at St James's Park and joined the throng along the Mall... at one stage the crowds were so dense that my feet were not on the ground and I was really frightened... we were so tightly packed that I couldn't raise my hand to wave my Union Jack. But everyone was happy, civilians and servicemen alike, joking and laughing and all having a really good time."

Most of the crowds made for Buckingham Palace. Millicent and her friends "took up our position to the right of the Victoria Memorial and we yelled and yelled 'We want the king'", and when the Royal Family appeared on the balcony, the king in naval uniform and Princess Elizabeth, the future queen, in her ATS uniform, "the yells turned to cheers".

But if there was enthusiasm for the royals, there was even more for Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime leader. The prime minister broadcast to the nation at three o'clock, announcing that hostilities with

Germany would cease at one minute past midnight, and that "our dear Channel Islands," the only part of British territory to have been occupied, "are to be freed today".

Jubilant crowds celebrate VE Day in Piccadilly Circus, London



Churchill's words were relayed through loudspeakers outside town halls and on village greens throughout the country. He paid tribute to "the military might... of Soviet Russia and... the overwhelming power of the United States of America", while reminding his audience of how "Britain had maintained the struggle single-handed for a whole year" – with help from the empire. "We may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing," he concluded, "but let us not forget for a moment the toil and effort that lie ahead," since there was still bitter fighting in the Far East. Knitting as she listened to the speech on the wireless far away in Argyll, a Scottish landowner's wife "felt what a lovely moment this must be for Churchill. I don't begrudge it him a bit even though my politics are so different – he certainly had the vision and the strategic imagination to get us through to victory as few men had".

By 5pm, there were thousands milling around outside the Ministry of Health where it had been promised that Churchill would speak. "We want Winnie!" the crowds roared. The minutes ticked by. "E's havin' a drink," one onlooker suggested. At twenty to six, Churchill appeared with members of his cabinet. "This is your hour," the prime minister told the people. "This is your victory. It is not the victory of a



party, or of any class. It's the victory of the great British nation as a whole." "Hip hip, hooray," urged Ernest Bevin, the minister of labour. "For he's a jolly good fellow," the crowds bellowed back.

### Wild for just one night

The partying went on into the night: crowds surged back to Buckingham Palace to call for the king and queen again, lines of conga dancers wove along Piccadilly, revellers jumped into the fountains in Trafalgar Square. The police were tolerant, instructed to intervene only when there was danger to life or limb, to let a war-weary people go a little wild just for one night. In fact, there was remarkably little trouble or drunken behaviour – partly because most pubs had already run dry by eight o'clock. Jack Conway "can't remember a single untoward incident amongst all that went on among the crowds, only joy, unadulterated and sincere". But the Scottish writer Naomi Mitchison noticed a certain aimlessness in the crowds: "everyone was tired and wanted to look, rather than to do".

The dome of St Paul's Cathedral, which had become an icon of Britain's defiance in the worst days of the Blitz, was caught in the beam of a V-shaped searchlight. "It looked like a piece of jewellery invented by a magician," marvelled the writer Desmond MacCarthy. In Green Park, a bonfire



All ages welcome the coming of peace at a street party in Lewisham, south east London

was ablaze and everything that could be thrown on – including park benches – was. Many celebrations took the form of something of an *auto da fé*. As it was double summer time, it was pretty well 10pm before it was properly dark, but bonfires had been lit long before that.

"The local bombsites had supposedly been cleared," remembers Stuart Hands, "but there was still plenty of stuff to burn – enough to have a bonfire of a lifetime". *BBC History Magazine* reader Majorie Cantwell, who was nine in 1945 and living in Ealing, west London, thought that "VE Day was the best day of my life. All morning we had been collecting things for the bonfire (including an old piano full of

woodworm!)... when darkness finally fell we lit our bonfire and placed a Hitler 'Guy' on the top. It was in the middle of the road so we were all able to dance around it. Later two radios were placed side by side in the window of a nearby house and BBC dance music was relayed into the street. All the grown-ups danced and sang until they were exhausted. When the dance music went off the air, my dad entertained everyone with his banjo and people sang and danced some more. We all went to bed that night tired and happy and I felt that nothing could ever harm us again." **U**

Juliet Gardiner is the author of *Wartime Britain 1939–1945* (Headline, 2004) and *The Blitz: The British under Attack* (HarperPress 2010)



Crowds cheer the king and queen as they tour London's war-damaged East End on 9 May 1945

### JOURNEYS

#### Books

- **The Day the War Ended: May 8 1945**  
*Victory in Europe* by Martin Gilbert (HarperCollins, 1995)
- **1945: The World We Fought For**  
by Robert Kee (Hamish Hamilton, 1985)
- **Ten Days in May: The People's Story of VE Day** by Russell Miller (with Renate Miller) (Michael Joseph, 1995)
- **London 1945: Life in the Debris of War** by Maureen Waller (John Murray, 2004)
- **The Day War Ended: Voices and Memories from 1945** foreword by Vera Lynn (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005)

#### Website

- You can find more first-hand experiences of VE Day on the BBC **WW2 People's War** website. There are over 16,000 stories and pictures on the site covering all aspects of the war and you can add to the archive too. [www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/)



A mushroom cloud rises over Nagasaki in August 1945

# Japan meets its nemesis

Japan did not surrender until atomic bombs were dropped on two cities in 1945. **Max Hastings** spoke to **Rob Attar** about the bloody conclusion of the Second World War in the Pacific

## Context

THE CONFLICT began in 1931 when Japan invaded Chinese Manchuria. Six years later war broke out between Japan and China. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 the USA declared war on Japan, but initially Japan dominated, invading European colonies and the Philippines. A series of naval battles, notably Midway in 1942, turned the tide and the USA's industrial power began to bite. The US navy undertook a strategy of island-hopping towards Japan, while General MacArthur retook the Philippines and the British empire fought in Burma. Despite defeats, bombing raids and a naval blockade, Japan did not surrender until atomic bombs were dropped on two cities in August 1945.

**You wrote about the defeat of Japan in your book *Nemesis* (2007). What motivated you to write it?**

On the whole people in Britain know much less about the war in Asia than they do about Europe. Yet it is an extraordinary story.

The war in Asia was so different from the war in Europe that we should call the conflicts the Second World Wars. It is amazing how little interest the Japanese and German allies took in what each other was doing and even among the western Allies only Churchill and Roosevelt and their chiefs of staff treated the European and Asian wars as a common cause.

**How important was Britain's contribution to the defeat of Japan?**

The British campaign to recapture Burma from the Japanese (1942–45) was brilliant and I don't think there is much doubt that its commander William Slim was the greatest British general of the war. All the same everybody knew that retaking Burma had absolutely nothing to do with defeating Japan. After the humiliations of 1941–42 Churchill felt it was absolutely essential to re-establish our prestige in the eyes of the subject people, even though the days of empire were numbered. It was a brilliant campaign but it was pointless.

**Likewise some people have argued that a few American**



**operations, especially the recapturing of the Philippines, were unnecessary. Do you agree?**

It is easy to look back 60 years later and say that one or another campaign was not necessary but one has to see things as they looked at the time. After all, the Americans had to do *something*. It was almost essential to go to the Philippines and establish air and naval bases there.

What was not essential was what General MacArthur actually did, which was to painstakingly fight his way through island after island at a huge cost of life. MacArthur was a disastrous figure whose status in America had been grossly inflated, by almost manic publicity, to a national hero. He was virtually unsackable by 1944 and was obsessed by personal ambitions, above all the retaking of the Philippines.

**What is your opinion of how American services handled the war effort overall?**

I don't think the American army's performance in the Pacific was that impressive but the marines and navy were astounding. I feel great admiration for the US navy. They had to endure long periods of terrible boredom in the heat of the Pacific, interspersed with moments of intense, terrifying action. It was the largest navy in the world and highly proficient, even though by 1945, 90 per cent of its officers and men were amateurs.

**One of the most contentious issues in the defeat of Japan is the dropping of the two atomic bombs. Do you believe this was the right thing to do?**

As conditions were in August 1945 I believe the decision of Truman was absolutely justified. There is a suggestion that the Japanese were about to give up anyway but I don't buy that at all. They were willing to negotiate but there is a huge difference between negotiation and surrender. As late as July 1945 they were still talking about being able to negotiate on their own terms. They wanted to keep their system of government, have no occupation of Japan and keep their possessions in Manchuria and Korea. They thought that any war crimes trials should be conducted by the Japanese themselves. This was all pure fantasy.

The Japanese behaved appallingly towards their fellow Asians in the war.

They conducted themselves with a savagery which was directly comparable with the behaviour of the Nazis, so the Allied leaders were right to insist on the unconditional surrender of Japan.

**Without dropping the atomic bombs, how else could Japan have been defeated?**

I believe the Americans would have continued firebombing, which was horrific enough, and also tightened their naval blockade. By August 1945 Japan was very close to starvation and the USA's next intention, if it hadn't used nuclear weapons, was to start bombing Japan's transport links. Had

**"As conditions were in August 1945 I believe the decision of Truman was absolutely justified"**

that happened millions of Japanese would very quickly have been starving to death. Without the atomic bombs I believe America probably could have brought about Japanese surrender a few months down the line, but the human cost would have been worse.

**Do you think the American administration was influenced by the USSR's imminent entry into the war against Japan when deciding to use the nuclear weapon?**

There is no doubt that by the last weeks of the war the western Allies had become very disturbed by the USSR's obvious determination to create an empire in eastern Europe. They were increasingly concerned that if the Soviets came into the Asian war, they were going to do there what they had done in Europe. This undoubtedly coloured the views of Truman but it was only a secondary factor in American eagerness to drop the atomic bombs. Not that I think that it was ignoble or unworthy of the American government to want to impress the Soviets.

Today we sometimes forget what a terrible threat the Soviet Union seemed to represent in 1945. In Poland, for example, the Russians were killing thousands of Poles for no greater crime than

US general Douglas MacArthur, whose Pacific strategy still causes controversy



## Timeline: The defeat of Japan

### 15 September 1944

US marines land on the beaches of the Philippines island of **Peleliu**, the beginning of a bloody campaign to recapture the archipelago

### 23–26 October 1944

The Japanese navy is shattered by American forces at **Leyte Gulf**, off the Philippines. This remains the **largest naval battle** in history

### 19 February–26 March 1945

Around 28,000 are killed as US forces eventually overwhelm the Japanese defenders on the Pacific island of **Iwo Jima**



Japanese flags captured at the battle for Iwo Jima

### 3 March 1945

Philippines capital **Manila** is retaken by American troops at a cost of around 120,000 lives – mostly civilians

### 9 March 1945

American B-29s set **Tokyo** alight with incendiary bombs. Some 100,000 Japanese are killed in the inferno

### 1 April–2 July 1945

Around 112,000 are killed in the battle for the Pacific island of **Okinawa**, the vast majority of which are Japanese

### 3 May 1945

Burmese capital **Rangoon** is conquered by British empire forces

### 6 August 1945

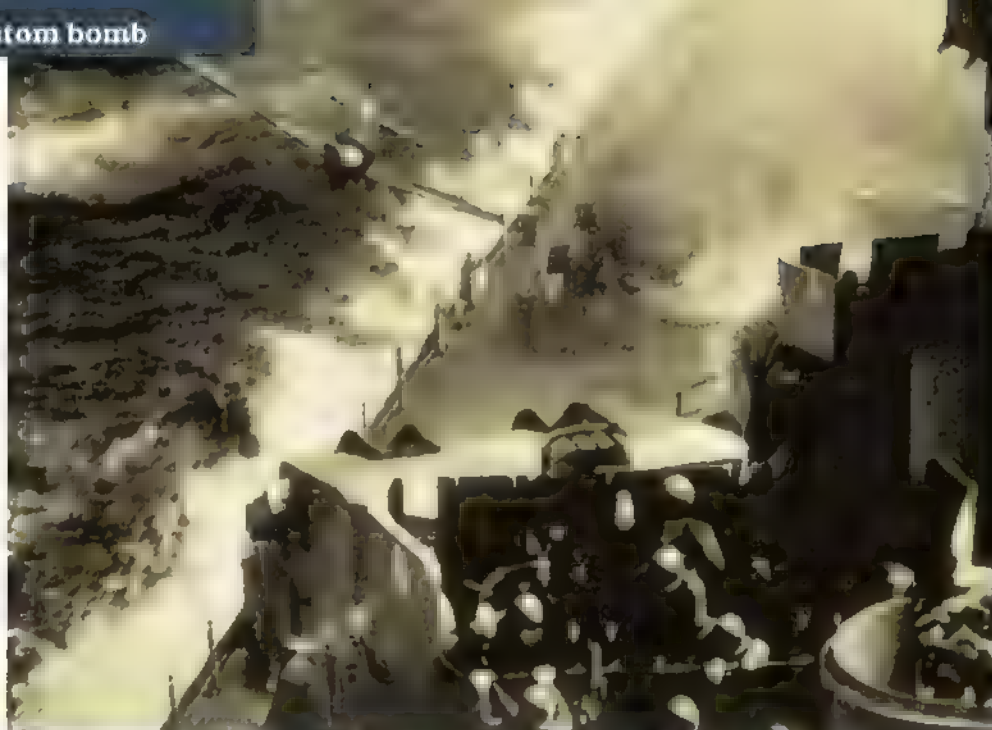
*Enola Gay* drops an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of **Hiroshima**

### 9 August 1945

Soviet armies surge into Japanese-occupied **Manchuria**. On the same day an atomic bomb hits **Nagasaki**

### 15 August 1945

**Japan surrenders**, although fighting continues in some areas for weeks



Suicidal courage: a kamikaze pilot menaces an American ship in the Pacific, 1944

supporting an independent, democratically elected Poland. The USSR was a frightening force.

Something I've tried to bring out in the book is the amazing campaign in Manchuria. Just after Hiroshima, 1.5 million Soviet troops poured into Manchuria and fought the last huge battles of the Second World War. I've stood at a place on the border of Russia and China called Houtou where you can poke your way through a fortress the Japanese had created. Even though Emperor Hirohito paved the way for Japan's surrender with a radio broadcast to the nation on 15 August, the battle at Houtou continued until 26 August, with the Japanese defenders fighting to the last. When the Russians sent a couple of Chinese to the Japanese garrison commander to ask them to surrender, the Japanese officer in command took out his sword and hacked off their heads. The battle went on.

### Why do you believe the Japanese were so unwilling to surrender?

Part of the psyche of a militaristic, nationalistic culture that grew up in Japan in first 40 years of the 20th century was that it was the ultimate dishonour to surrender. Very few Japanese were not prepared to sacrifice their lives without hesitation.

I've read POW interrogation reports of the relatively tiny number of Japanese prisoners who were captured. Most begged to be resettled in Australia or Brazil or anywhere because they didn't believe they could go back to Japan after allowing themselves to be taken prisoner. They thought they would be outcasts even in their own

## "There was a cultural idea imbued in the Japanese military that somehow cruelty represented virility"

families. I interviewed one man captured at Iwo Jima, who, even after the end of the war, couldn't bring himself to return home for months because he was terrified to go back to his family. In the end, of course, his family were enormously pleased to see him come home alive.

### One aspect of this desire for self-sacrifice was the Kamikaze attacks. How much damage did this method of warfare cause?

The Kamikaze effort was pretty effective but it did not have the slightest chance of altering the outcome of the war. These half-trained pilots with a few hundred aircraft inflicted a great deal of damage, but most Japanese knew in

Japan was ready to fight a long rearguard action against the expected Allied invasion



their hearts that all this suicidal courage couldn't change things. In Okinawa in May and June 1945, Kamikaze attacks were killing thousands of American sailors and sinking dozens of ships when Germany had already surrendered and everybody knew that the war was over. It aroused ferocious bitterness in the minds of the Americans that they were losing lives in this suicidal resistance.

### The Japanese war effort is renowned in the west for its brutality. Do you think this view is justified?

When I began this book, I tried to put behind me all the horror stories and look at the whole thing objectively. But by the end I came to the conclusion that the Japanese had behaved every bit as barbarically, in fact worse in many respects, than most people here understand.

There was an idea that became imbued in the Japanese military in the early 20th century that somehow cruelty represented virility. They were people who trained their soldiers by making them engage in bayonet practice on Chinese prisoners. There is such a thing as a universal standard of humanity towards the weak and oppressed that the Japanese rejected.

There has been no effort by the Japanese to come to terms with what they have done. We even had the extraordinary business of former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe saying publicly that the women conscripted in China and Korea for the brothels of the Japanese army were volunteers who weren't made to do it.

*Nemesis* is already being sold in many foreign countries but I don't think there is the slightest chance it will be sold in Japan, although I've written as sympathetically as I could about the experiences of many Japanese in uniform and as civilians under the bombings. They just don't want to know. ■

**Sir Max Hastings** is an acclaimed journalist and military historian. His latest book is *The Secret War: Spies, Codes and Guerrillas 1939-1945* (William Collins 2015)

### JOURNEYS

#### Book

► ***Nemesis: The Battle for Japan, 1944-45*** by Max Hastings (Harper Perennial, 2008)



# HIROSHIMA COUNTDOWN

**Stephen Walker** describes the tense hours that led up to the explosion that became the defining event of the 20th century



When time stood still

A watch found at Hiroshima shows the time of the bomb – 8.15am Japanese time

►►► THE WAR IN EUROPE has been over for three months. But the Japanese show no signs of giving up. Despite daily incendiary raids which have so far wiped out nearly 60 of their cities, their government vows to fight on. At the Potsdam conference near Berlin, the Allied leaders broadcast their final warning to Japan, demanding her unconditional surrender. The alternative is "prompt and utter destruction". The warning is rejected. Now the Allies will show the Japanese they are as good as their word. Prompt and utter destruction is no empty term. It is a reality, taking the shape of a bomb like no other in history. By 5 August 1945, the preparations are almost complete. Tomorrow, a Japanese city will fall victim to the world's first weapon of mass destruction. The final countdown has begun. ►►►

► In the summer of 1945, Japan was one hour behind Guam War Time – the time used on Tinian and by the crew of the *Enola Gay*. For the purposes of consistency, all times in Japan and the western Pacific are recorded in Guam War Time

**ZERO MINUS** 14 0:15 10 7 0:05

**5 August, 14:00 hours. Bomb assembly building, Tinian Island.** Since its capture in July 1944, Tinian Island in the western Pacific has been transformed into the biggest air base in the world. But the base also has a secret. In a remote corner, protected by several machine-gun emplacements, a dull-grey, oversized trash can is slowly wheeled from a hangar towards a waiting B 29 bomber. With infinite care, the trash can is winched into the bomb bay. It is a tight fit. Several guards stand by, their

weapons ready. Security has never been tighter on this island. The trash can is too valuable. The product of three years research and \$2 billion, it is America's most secret weapon. In less than 12 hours, the bomb they call *Little Boy* will be on its way to the doomed city of Hiroshima in Japan.

**ZERO MINUS** 9 hours 15 minutes

**6 August, 00:01. Briefing room, Tinian.** The man standing on the platform fixes his gaze on the men who will fly with him in a few hours. His name is



"A chill went through me.  
The make-believe was over"

ABE SPITZER, RADIO OPERATOR ON ENOLA GAY

#### Men for the mission

Colonel Tibbets  
(right) and Captain  
Parsons brief  
aircrews before the  
raid on Hiroshima

Colonel Paul Warfield Tibbets, a tough, bullnecked 30-year-old with thick black eyebrows and a pugnacious chin. A veteran of the fierce air battles over Germany, he was handpicked 11 months ago to train this squadron and lead this mission. None of his men have been told the exact purpose of that training. They know only that their mission is expected to end the war. And tonight is the night they have all been waiting for.

In the next few hours, declares Tibbets, one of three cities will be hit with a revolutionary weapon, whose destructive power is equivalent to a 2,000-bomber raid. He outlines the targets in order of priority: Hiroshima, Kokura, Nagasaki. Three B-29s will fly to these cities one hour ahead of the strike force to check the weather. The city with the best conditions will be selected for attack. Special tinted goggles are then handed out. Tibbets tells everybody to wear them over the target, otherwise they could be blinded. This bomb was going to be brighter than a super-sized sun. The tension in the room is electric. "A chill went through me," writes Abe Spitzer, a radio man, in his diary. "The make-believe was over."

Meanwhile, 9,000 miles away, on board the USS *Augusta* in the mid-Atlantic, US President Truman emerges from Sunday service. He is halfway home from Potsdam. Yesterday, he received word that the atomic mission was set to depart at 02:45 Tinian time.

His decision to use the bomb is not made without misgivings, but President Truman sees no real alternative. Just a few weeks previously, his joint chiefs of staff had presented their timetable for the projected invasion of Japan. The invasion is planned in two phases. The first, Operation Olympic, is scheduled for 1 November; the second for March 1946. Estimates of casualties vary, but one thing is certain: the Japanese will fight to the bitter end. Still fresh is the memory of Okinawa, the island south of Japan, captured in June after three months of brutal fighting. At least 12,000 Americans and 107,000 Japanese soldiers were killed.

To the president the one solution to the even greater carnage of an invasion of the Japanese home islands is now hanging inside a B-29 bomb bay on the other side of the world.

#### ZERO MINUS 8 hours 47 minutes

**02:27. Tinian.** Before departure, the air crews are subjected to a battery of photographers. By tomorrow the news will be splashed across the world. The B-29 dazzles under floodlights like some Hollywood premiere. Finally the men climb aboard. A photographer snaps a last photo. Tibbets waves out of the window. Beneath him is the name of his plane, *Enola Gay*. It is also the name of his

mother, immortalised in ways neither of them could possibly imagine.

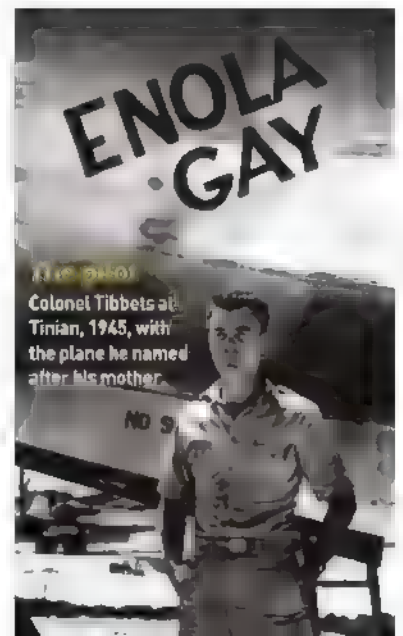
The runway is one and a half miles long. Fire trucks are parked along its edge. With its big bomb, *Enola Gay* is dangerously overloaded. In the past 24 hours, four B-29s carrying conventional bombs have crashed on take-off. If *Enola Gay* also crashes, it could set off a nuclear accident, wiping out the entire island. As he opens the throttles, Tibbets notices his hands are sweating. The plane races down the runway. Just before it runs into the sea, Tibbets hauls the wheels off the ground. A minute later, two other B-29s follow, one packed with cameras, the other with observers. All three aircraft disappear to the north, for the start of their 1,500-mile flight to Japan. But nobody yet knows on which of the three cities the bomb will drop. The lives of thousands of now-sleeping people depends on what the weather will be like tomorrow morning.

#### ZERO MINUS 6 hours, 26 minutes

**02:50. Hiroshima.** Despite the blackout, Hiroshima is still relatively comfortable in this fifth year of the war. Even a few cinemas are still open. Earlier tonight, people streamed to the Kotobuki theatre to see one of the season's hit movies, *Four Weddings*. But food is scarce. A staple diet for the city's inhabitants is grass. The one consolation is that Hiroshima has so far escaped the bombing. Over the past few months teams of schoolchildren have pulled down houses to create firebreaks in case the bombers come. But they

#### Spreading the news

One of the pamphlets dropped over Japan by American aircraft announcing the detonation of the atomic bomb







KAWAYA MACH The famous place of 13. Jura  
KAWAYA MACH 新 町 馬 場

### Calm before the storm

The street of Kawaya-Cho in Hiroshima, c1930

never do. A week ago, the mayor brought his baby granddaughter to stay because, he wrote, Hiroshima "is so safe". A rumour is spreading that Truman's own mother is a prisoner in the city – that is why it has never been, nor will be, bombed. The order to spare it has come from the president of the United States himself.

**ZERO MINUS 6 hours, 16 minutes**

**03:00. *Enola Gay*.** Within minutes of take-off, a balding naval captain on board *Enola Gay* opens a hatch at the rear of the flight deck and steps down into the dark bomb bay. His name is Deak Parsons, and his job is one of the most dangerous of this mission. In the next few minutes he will arm the atomic bomb. With an assistant carrying a torch, he squeezes past *Little Boy's* black bulk. Only the thin bomb-bay doors separate him from 5,000 feet of thin air. Squatting

turbulence, his concentration is total. It has to be. A slight slip and the mission could end in disaster. Back on Tinian, General Farrell listens to the radio. By the time Parsons reaches stage eight – Connect Firing Line – his voice disappears into static. At this point, nobody on the ground is certain whether Parsons has succeeded, or blown himself and *Enola Gay* out of the sky.

**ZERO MINUS 4 hours, 16 minutes**

**05:00 Tokyo.** Within the sanctuary of his palace, Emperor Hirohito, Son of Heaven, watches the dawn after another sleepless night. These days, he does not look much like a god. Most of the time he wanders aimlessly through his palace in old clothes and slippers. His right cheek twitches uncontrollably. He knows the war is lost. Despite the army fanatics on his council, he is desperate to find a solution. All his hopes lie with the Russians, still at peace with Japan. Perhaps they will broker a deal with the Allies. His ambassador in Moscow, Naotake Sato, has opened negotiations but so far they have met with failure. Sato is a realist. In his mind, there is only one way to end the war:

unconditional surrender. "If the government and military dilly-dally," he cables Tokyo, "then all Japan will be reduced to ashes." It is a typically prescient remark, more accurate than Sato could ever have imagined.

**ZERO MINUS 1 hour, 7 minutes**

**08:09. On board *Straight Flush*, 30,000 feet over Hiroshima.** The moment he approaches Hiroshima, Buck Eatherly knows it will be today's target. As captain of the weather plane assigned to the city, conditions look near-perfect. A huge hole has miraculously opened in the clouds, exposing its heart. Twice Eatherly sweeps over it – both times completely undisturbed – before his radio man sends the weather report back to the strike force, one hour behind. On board *Enola Gay*, Tibbets receives the message. "It's Hiroshima," he says. He adjusts his course towards the city. Co-pilot Bob Lewis jots a note in a private log: "Well folks, it won't be long now".

**ZERO MINUS 45 minutes**

**08:31. Hiroshima.** Despite an alert, hardly anyone takes notice of Eatherly's plane. After all, the Americans never



Emperor Hirohito of Japan, c1945

"If I live for a hundred years, I will never get these few minutes out of my mind"

BOB LEWIS, CO-PILOT OF ENOLA GAY

drop bombs. Trams trundle over the city's 49 bridges, packed with workbound commuters.

Some of the resident 43,000 soldiers perform their morning calisthenics in the sunshine. Schoolchildren stream to their places of work in factories and offices, for there is no school these days. Everybody is mobilised for the coming invasion. Even the nurses in Hiroshima's hospitals practise thrusting bamboo spears against dummy enemies. Meanwhile, the city's newspapers scream out the same bullish headlines. "The Fighting Spirit of the People Lives on", reads one, adding that victory is just around the corner.

**ZERO MINUS 5 minutes**

**09:11. Aboard *Enola Gay*, 22 miles from the Aiming Point.** To Major Tom Ferebee, the bombardier, the city glinting on the horizon is instantly recognisable from countless photos. The only difference is that it is in colour. A handsome Errol Flynn lookalike, Ferebee is a master of his craft, a veteran of 63 missions. Tibbets once described him as "the best bombardier in the whole damn air force". His eyesight is legendary. He is not the sort of man to miss.

With his left eye pressed to the bombsight, he searches the dense grid of streets for one feature. Then he sees it: a bridge where the Ota river branches in two, shaped like a T – the aiming-

point for the bomb. His voice bursts over the intercom: "I've got the bridge". Tibbets immediately warns everyone to put on their goggles. At 09:15 Ferebee flicks a switch. A warning tone howls over the airwaves. In exactly 15 seconds, *Little Boy* will drop into the clear blue skies over Hiroshima. "There will be a short intermission," Lewis notes in his log, "while we bomb the target".

**ZERO MINUS 3 minutes**

**09:13. Air defence bunker, Hiroshima.** In Saijo, east of Hiroshima, an observer spots all three aircraft heading towards the city. He calls the air defence bunker. A schoolgirl takes the message: "Three large enemy planes heading west. Top alert". In a radio station 1,000 metres from the T-shaped bridge, an announcer is finishing breakfast when the bell in the alert room starts clanging. Masanobu Furuta's job is to broadcast air-raid warnings to the citizens. Now he rushes to the studio as an engineer thrusts the latest warning into his hands.

**ZERO MINUS 44 seconds**

**09:15:17 Aboard *Enola Gay*.** The warning tone cuts. The single shackles drops its dead weight into the freezing air. It wobbles before plunging towards the city. Tibbets immediately slams the big bomber into a tight diving turn. He has exactly 44 seconds to escape before the bomb explodes. As *Enola Gay* tears

away, *Little Boy* continues its fall, accelerating almost to the speed of sound. From the observation aircraft, blast gauge canisters float down over the city, suspended from parachutes. Some of the inhabitants cheer. They think one of the bombers has just been shot down. In the radio studio, Furuta begins speaking into the microphone: "Three large enemy planes approaching..." He gets no further. The station suddenly tilts as he is hurled into the air. Before the sirens have a chance to sound, the sky falls in over Hiroshima.

**ZERO HOUR**

**09:16:01 Hiroshima.** The impact on the city is immediate and catastrophic. In the first billionth of a second the temperature at the burst-point reaches 60 million degrees centigrade, 10,000 times hotter than the sun's surface.

The sky falls in

The mushroom cloud rises above Hiroshima, following the bomb's detonation







**The grim aftermath** An aerial view of Hiroshima shows the devastation caused by *Little Boy*. Perhaps 80,000 people died in the first few seconds after the blast

A blinding flash lights up the sky. Within the first three seconds, thousands of people are incinerated, carbonised into charred smoking bundles. Birds ignite in mid-air. Steel-framed buildings liquefy like wax.

Hard behind comes the shockwave, ripping out at the speed of sound, crushing every obstacle that lies in its path. The wall of high pressure leaves a near vacuum behind, sucking viscera out of bodies. Hundreds of radioactive isotopes spill out of the fireball, penetrating flesh and bone. Within 500 metres the effect is invariably lethal. American scientists later call this zone the 'scare radius'. Perhaps 80,000 people die in those first seconds after the blast. Thousands more will die later from burns or radiation poisoning,

among them the mayor and the baby granddaughter he brought to the city because it was so safe.

Nine miles away, the shock wave strikes *Enola Gay* with a huge crash. "My God", thinks Dutch Van Kirk, the navigator, "the bastards are shooting at us!" Tibbets fights to keep the plane under control. In the tail, rear-gunner Bob Caron watches in astonishment as the biggest cloud he has ever seen punches up into the sky. Beneath it Hiroshima has disappeared. Grabbing a camera, he takes seven photos of the mushroom-shaped cloud: iconic images of Hiroshima's annihilation. The cloud surges into the stratosphere. Lewis stares in shock. "My God, what have we done?" he writes in his log. "If I live for a hundred years, I will never get these few minutes out of my mind."



**A tough start to life**

A mother breast-feeds her child following the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki

▶▶▶ "This is the greatest thing in history," said President Truman, when he heard the news. But still the Japanese did not surrender. Three days later a second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, killing 70,000. A third bomb was being readied before Japan finally accepted defeat. By 14 August, the war was over. For the rest of his life Truman never regretted his decision to drop the bombs. "It occurred to me," he wrote, "that a quarter of a million of the flower of our manhood were worth a couple of Japanese cities." There are many who still question the morality of that equation. But one thing nobody questions: at 9.16am on that Monday in August 70 years ago, the world changed forever ■

Stephen Walker's film *Hiroshima: Days That Shook the World* (BBC Two, 2004) won an Emmy

## JOURNEYS

### Books

- ▶ **Shockwave: Countdown to Hiroshima** by Stephen Walker (John Murray, 2005)
- ▶ **Hiroshima** by John Hersey (Penguin, 1986)
- ▶ **The Tibbets Story** by Paul Tibbets (Stern and Day, 1978)
- ▶ **Before the Fall-out: From Marie Curie to Hiroshima** by Diana Preston (Doubleday, 2005)

# NAZIS IN THE DOCK



MORE  
from the  
**BBC**  
▶ page 103



In 1946, 21 German leaders were tried by an international tribunal at Nuremberg. **Richard Overy** looks at how these trials shaped international attitudes to state crime in the 20th century, and investigates whether the principles established there could – or should – survive into the 21st

### What became of the 21 German leaders tried for war crimes?

● **Baldur von Schirach**  
Hitler Youth leader and Gauleiter of Vienna – 20 years in prison

● **Alfred Jodl**  
Operations Chief, High Command HQ – Hanged

● **Frank von Papen**  
Diplomat, former deputy chancellor to Hitler – Acquitted

● **Arthur Seyss-Inquart**  
Reich commissioner, Netherlands – Hanged

● **Albert Speer**  
Reich minister for armaments – 20 years in prison

● **Constantin Freiherr von Neurath**  
Diplomat and foreign minister – 15 years in prison

● **Hans Fritzsche**  
Head of Wireless News – Acquitted

● **Hermann Wilhelm Göring**  
Chief of the Luftwaffe – Sentenced to death but committed suicide

● **Rudolf Hess**  
Deputy leader of the Nazi party – Life imprisonment

● **Joachim von Ribbentrop**  
Foreign minister – Hanged

● **Wilhelm Keitel**  
Chief of staff of high command of armed forces – Hanged

● **Ernst Kaltenbrunner**  
Head of Reich security main office – Hanged

● **Alfred Rosenberg**  
Nazi theorist, Reich minister for the occupied eastern territories – Hanged

● **Hans Frank**  
Governor general of occupied Poland – Hanged

● **Wilhelm Frick**  
Minister of interior – Hanged

● **Julius Streicher**  
Editor of *Der Stürmer*, advocated annihilation of Jews – Hanged

● **Walter Funk**  
Reich minister of economic affairs – Life imprisonment

● **Hjalmar Schacht**  
Reich minister of economic affairs before Funk – Acquitted

#### ALSO TRIED BUT NOT PICTURED ABOVE WERE:

● **Fritz Sauckel**  
Director of forced labour deployment – Hanged

● **Erich Raeder**  
Naval commander – Life imprisonment

● **Karl Dönitz**  
Commander-in-chief of the navy and Hitler's successor – 10 years in prison



**T**HERE HAS been a lot of talk about war crimes in the decade or so since the Iraq war broke out in 2003. Some unsuccessful attempts have been made to hold American and British leaders responsible for waging aggressive war in defiance of international agreements. There has been much public discussion as to whether the conduct of coalition forces in Iraq has violated the rules of war, particularly in the damage caused to civilian lives and facilities. There is an unintended irony in these accusations, for just over 70 years ago the United States and Great Britain took the lead in organising a large-scale public trial of the political and military leaders of Hitler's Germany, the Third Reich. For the first time in history, these senior figures were accused of a range of crimes, including waging aggressive war and crimes against humanity. There was never any doubt in the minds of western leaders that Germany was guilty of

## The dubious legal basis of the trial gave the Allied prosecution teams many problems to confront

violating accepted norms of international behaviour and that, as a result, the German leaders deserved to be punished.

The trial itself might never have taken place. British prime minister Winston Churchill was all in favour of a lynch-law solution – identification of wanted war criminals by a senior officer and execution by firing squad within six hours. He hoped this would avoid any political wrangling and the long, complex

process of a trial for which there was no precedent and only a dubious legal justification. At first President Franklin D Roosevelt accepted this, but much of his administration did not. When the Soviets insisted on a trial in order to expose the criminal nature of the Third Reich, Roosevelt's successor in April 1945, Harry Truman, agreed that summary justice was out of the question. In May, the British reluctantly agreed to help organise an international military tribunal to put on trial a cohort of German leaders, and six months later the Tribunal began its sessions in the Palace of Justice in the German city of Nuremberg.

The decision presented two problems: who should be put on trial, and what would be the nature of the charges. The first issue was complicated by the suicides of Hitler, Goebbels and Himmler, the three leading figures of the Third Reich. The Allies were left with Göring, caught, along with a large collection of stolen artworks, in southern Germany in May 1945.

He was described by the US prosecution as "one of the world's worst criminals" and generally regarded as prisoner number one. Other defendants were chosen either because of the office they filled – foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, Hitler's military headquarters chief Wilhelm Keitel, or Albert Speer, Hitler's armaments minister – or because

they were taken as representative of a wider circle of the guilty. For instance, Julius Streicher stood for German anti-Semitism, Hjalmar Schacht, the former economics minister, stood for German finance-capitalism and armaments, and Hans Fritzsche, a minor propaganda ministry official, for the absent Goebbels.

The most difficult case was that of Hitler's former deputy, Rudolf Hess, who had flown to Scotland in May 1941 with a crazy mission for



### Taking the oath

Göring, the highest-ranking Nazi to be captured. Hitler, Goebbels and Himmler all killed themselves

peace, been imprisoned by the British and relapsed into bouts of self-induced, or 'hysterical', amnesia. The British thought he was not fit to stand trial. But, out of fear that the Soviet regime might suspect their motives for withholding him, he was flown to Nuremberg in October 1945, diagnosed by a committee of senior psychiatrists as fit to plead, and added to the list of defendants just days before the trial opened in the Nuremberg Palace of Justice on 20 November 1945. After a brief revival in November he relapsed again into a state of almost permanent forgetfulness.

The charges were not clear-cut either. The American prosecution team took the lead in framing charges which had no precedent in international law. The wider purpose of the trial was explained as an effort "to raise international standards of conduct", but the prosecution teams were forced to classify as crimes actions that were not criminal in international law at the time they were committed.

Robert Jackson, the US Supreme Court judge chosen to lead their prosecution team and the man who shaped the success of the trials more than anyone else, explained to Truman that the strictly legal issue did not matter, since what the German leaders had done "have been regarded as criminal since the time of Cain". The resulting charges had to be based on retrospective justice, but they were also rooted in a traditional moral code with which the American public

## Why Nuremberg? How a German city shaped modern history

WHEN THE Allies decided to hold a trial of German leaders it took a long time before the site could be agreed between the victors, who had divided Germany up into separate zones of occupation. By July 1945 the issue was deadlocked. The British and Americans had toyed with the idea of Leipzig, Munich or Luxembourg. The Russians thought that Berlin, the 'fascist capital', was the proper place, but this was a city they dominated. Finally the American military governor, Lucius Clay,

suggested Nuremberg, the site of the great Nazi rallies. US supreme court judge Robert Jackson discovered among the battered ruins of the city an almost intact court house, the Palace of Justice (right), with a prison behind it. The Russians agreed with reluctance, insisting that the tribunal authorities would still be based in Berlin. Building workers moved into the Palace of Justice and it was ready just in time for the trial to start in November 1945.



Nuremberg's Palace of Justice, the venue for the Nuremberg war trial





### Senior Nazis at Nuremberg

(from left to right) Göring (chief of Luftwaffe and Hitler's Reich Marshall), Hess (deputy leader of the Nazi party), von Ribbentrop (foreign minister) and Keitel (chief of staff of the OKW - high command of the armed forces)

could identify. Conspiracy to wage aggressive war, crimes against humanity and crimes against peace were defined to cover the things that Hitler's regime had done, none of which had previously existed in terms agreed in international law. There was also included an entirely new crime – genocide, or the death of a nation. This definition of international crime was drawn up by the Polish lawyer Rafael Lemkin and finally incorporated in the United Nations Genocide Convention signed by the international community in 1948.

The dubious legal basis of the trial gave the Allied prosecution teams many problems to confront once the trial was under way. Conspiracy was difficult to prove. Some of the defendants – Hess in particular – were no longer in office when most of the crimes were committed, while the idea of aggressive war as a crime sat uncomfortably with the western knowledge that the Soviet regime had attacked and occupied eastern Poland in 1939 and part of Finland in 1940. The Soviet Union refused to allow any discussion of the German-Soviet Pact of 1939 and Soviet prosecutors were instructed to shout down any attempt by the German prisoners to question the moral credentials of the Soviet dictatorship. Nevertheless, Jackson was determined to make all the cases stick. ➤

### The repentant Nazi

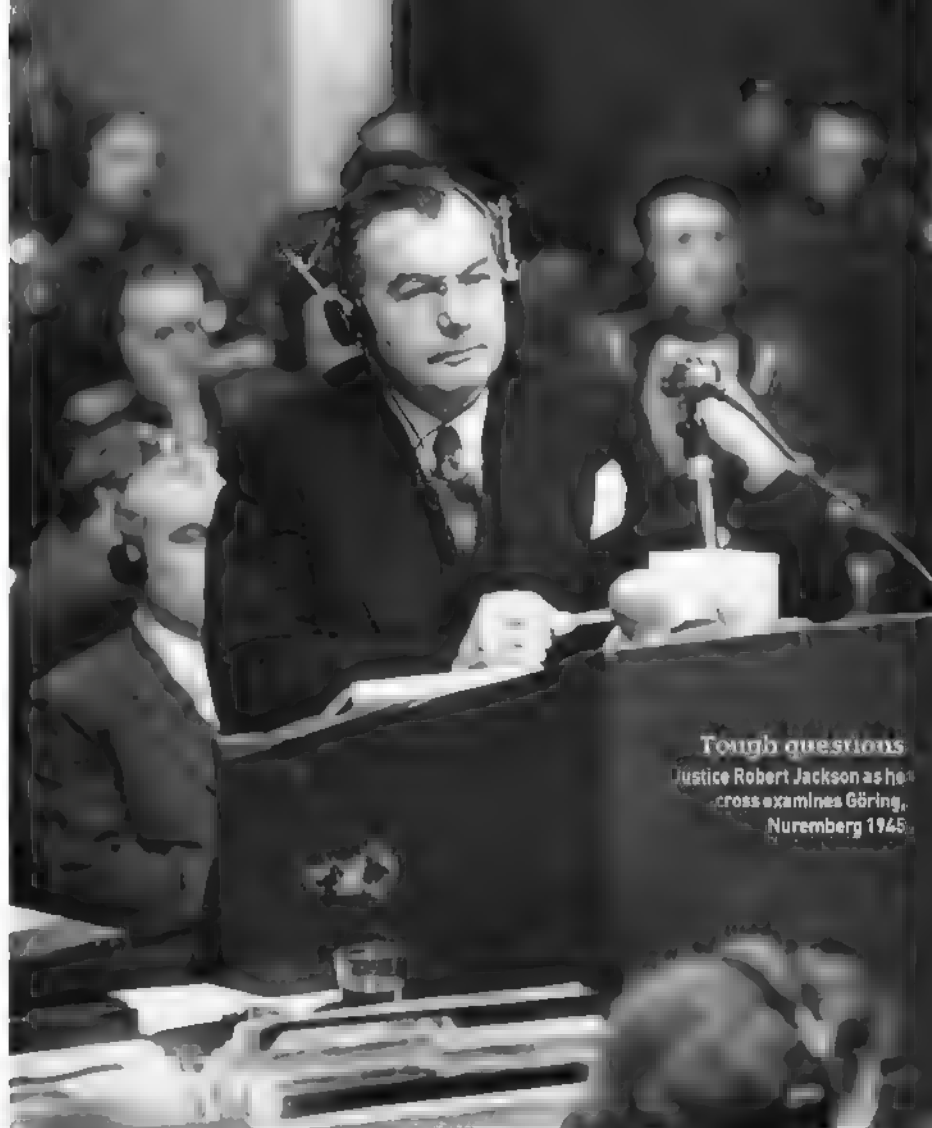
Albert Speer accepted that he had committed crimes and expressed regret. It's thought that this is what saved him from a death sentence





### Defence strategy

8 January 1946. Göring, Dönitz and Hess confer during a lull in the war crimes trial in Nuremberg



### Tough questions

Justice Robert Jackson as he cross examines Göring, Nuremberg 1945

## Why bombing was off the list of charges

BOTH SIDES at Nuremberg, victors and vanquished, knew that the Allies had also been guilty of war crimes. The German armed forces' War Crimes Bureau investigated Soviet war crimes such as the murder of prisoners-of-war, acts of military terrorism and the killing of Red Cross personnel during the war with a view to identifying and punishing the guilty if they won the war.

The issue on which the Allies proved most vulnerable was the bombing of German and other European cities, which resulted in the deaths of at least half a million civilians. When the Allies began to prepare the trials in the summer of 1945 they realised that, if they accused the Hitler regime of bombing as a war crime, they left themselves open to accusations that they had bombed cities and killed civilians just as unscrupulously. In June 1945 the accusation of bombing was quietly dropped

from the charges being prepared against the major war criminals.

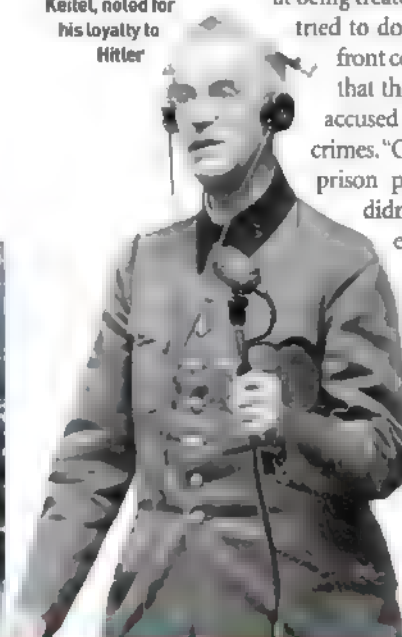
In recent years historians have begun to reassess the Allied bombing campaign in the light of recent international law and there is now a consensus that bombing should be regarded as a war crime whether it was committed by the Germans, the Japanese or the Allies. At the time, however, it was not.

It was only in 1977, under the terms of the so-called Geneva Protocols, that the deliberate bombing of civilians was finally defined as violating the laws of war.



Some of the bombs used in Britain's sorties

**Loyal soldier**  
21 September 1946:  
military leader Wilhelm  
Keitel, noted for  
his loyalty to  
Hitler



The western states ignored the evidence of Soviet crimes and collaborated together for almost the last time as allies before the onset of the Cold War.

The prisoners responded to the trial in a variety of ways. Robert Ley, head of the sprawling German Labour Front and its *Strength Through Joy* leisure organisation, throttled himself in his cell before the trial started, leaving a suicide note confessing his unbearable shame at being treated as a common criminal. Göring tried to dominate the others so a common

front could be presented, acknowledging that they had done the things they were accused of but denying that these were crimes. "Of course we re-armed," he told the prison psychiatrist. "I'm only sorry we didn't re-arm more." But he too evaded the hangman's noose by killing himself with cyanide, perhaps supplied by a US guard, on the night before his execution. Speer opted for the opposite strategy, accepting common responsibility for perpetrating acts that he now regarded as crimes, though never quite able to confess his own personal guilt. Hess sat and read novels or stared about him,

HULTON ARCHIVE GETTY IMAGES; CLYD TRH PICTURE; T ME & LEE OF TUPES GETTY IMAGES



## Lawyers fear that the effort to bring some sense of order and justice to the world system 70 years ago at Nuremberg is now merely history

oblivious to the proceedings except for two dramatic moments of lucidity at the start and end of his trial.

In the end, of the 21 indicted men, 11 were sentenced to death. Hess got life imprisonment, Speer, saved from the noose perhaps by his willingness to confess collective guilt, was given 20 years, while three of the men – Schacht, von Papen and Fritzsche – were acquitted of all charges.

The German people reacted to the trials with a mixture of indifference and repulsion. By the time it was over, in almost a year of legal wrangling, public opinion in the Allied states had tired of the drama. Yet the tribunal proved of immense importance in shaping the international approach to the whole issue of state crime. The Genocide Convention of 1948, the Geneva Convention on the laws of war in 1949 and the additional Geneva Protocols of 1977, and the European Convention of Human Rights, signed in 1950, all owed something to the experience of Nuremberg and the desire of the international community to supply clearly agreed limits to what could and could not be done within the law in international and civil conflicts. Sadly, in a great many cases since the Nuremberg trials, aggressive war, vicious civil war or the death and violation of civilians have gone entirely unpunished.

Only in cases where the international community has agreed to act in concert against small states to prevent a disaster has the legacy of Nuremberg been properly asserted. Even here, in the case of former Yugoslavia or in Rwanda, the international community acted very late and has struggled to identify or find the guilty and to bring them to trial.

The history of the past two decades has demonstrated that the goodwill of the major powers is essential if the principles established at Nuremberg are to be maintained. In the war against terror, western states have engaged in what some have seen as acts of aggression and civilian atrocity that violate those principles.

Several attempts have been made to bring western statesmen or generals before the International Criminal Court, which was set up in 2002 to deal with just such cases, but they have all come to nothing. The USA did not ratify the 1977 protocols defining protection for civilians in war, nor, in fact, did they even agree to subscribe to the International Criminal Court. Since the attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, the US government has accepted the necessity of employing any means

deemed to be expedient in the conflict with Islamic fundamentalism, despite criticism of some of its actions from human rights groups, particularly in respect of the treatment of those prisoners that have been held at the detention centre at Guantanamo Bay.

Ten years ago, the then British defence minister, John Reid, called for a radical reassessment of the Geneva Convention to free the hands of the west in the war on terror. The American political scientist Philip Bobbitt argued in his book *Terror and Consent* (Allen Lane, 2008) that the west has to completely rethink the weapons and concepts that were relevant to 20th century conflicts, and to redefine international law so that it does not fetter the proper conduct of the anti-terror war.

In reality, the terms of the Convention have already been violated by the west and its allies for some years in order to be able to fight the threat of terror more effectively. Regrettably, this is creating a growing despondency among

international lawyers that the effort to bring some permanent basis for order and justice to the world system 70 years ago at Nuremberg is now merely history. **II**

**Richard Overy** is professor of history at the University of Exeter, and one of Europe's leading experts on modern military history

### JOURNEYS

#### Books

► **From Nuremberg to the Hague: the Future of International Criminal Justice**

edited by Philippe Sands (Cambridge University Press, 2003)

► **Interrogations: the Nazi Elite in Allied Hands** by Richard Overy (Penguin, 2001)

#### Websites

The **Nuremberg Trials Digital Document Archive** from Harvard Law School Library is at [http://nuremberg.law.harvard.edu/php/docs\\_swi.php?DI=1&text=anat](http://nuremberg.law.harvard.edu/php/docs_swi.php?DI=1&text=anat)

This feature was published to accompany the **BBC Two** drama series **Nazis on Trial**. Read more about the trial at the BBC's history website [www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/two/two\\_nuremberg\\_article\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/two/two_nuremberg_article_01.shtml)

## Richard Overy on war crimes in the 20th and 21st centuries

**NUREMBERG** WAS the first tribunal of its kind, but also the last. In more than 70 years since the Nuremberg trials no attempt has been made to put on trial all the leading military and civilian authorities of a nation for a range of crimes against peace and humanity.

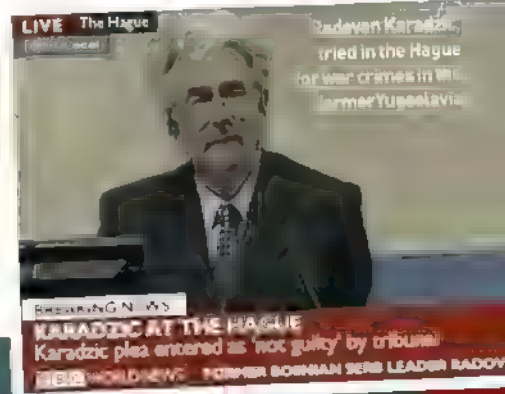
Not until 1993 was another international tribunal created, this time for crimes perpetrated in the former Yugoslavia, followed a year later by a tribunal for crimes committed in the Rwandan genocide. But in neither case was it possible to indict an entire system, and both dragged on for years, forfeiting widespread public support. The creation of the International Criminal Court in 2002 was designed to provide a permanent home for all cases of war crimes, but so far has proved ineffective.

This does not mean that there have not been trials. The perpetrators of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam were tried and punished in 1971 because they had violated established rules of conduct, while more

recently the evidence of gratuitous torture in Iraq has also led to punishment.

The trials associated with Rwanda and Yugoslavia and the trial of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad were based on international views of what constitute crimes against humanity. This conception is still rooted in what happened at Nuremberg, when unimaginable crimes, above all the murder of Europe's Jews, had to be punished for the first time by an international court. There still remains the issue of all those crimes of war that have gone unpunished over the past 70 years, either because intervention was not practicable, or because the judicial procedures would face huge practical difficulties. The problem of forcing a major state to conform with legal conventions is persistent, since there is no effective way of enforcing compliance.

Nuremberg was a unique opportunity because Germany as a sovereign power temporarily no longer existed. The danger is that the international community will increasingly accept that trials and punishment do not, in general, work. It follows that the insecure nature of the modern world, threatened by terrorism, means that the rule of international law no longer makes much sense, and could be replaced by more flexible and expedient rules. By revisiting the principles of Nuremberg it may be possible to remind the international community that justice is indivisible, not conditional.

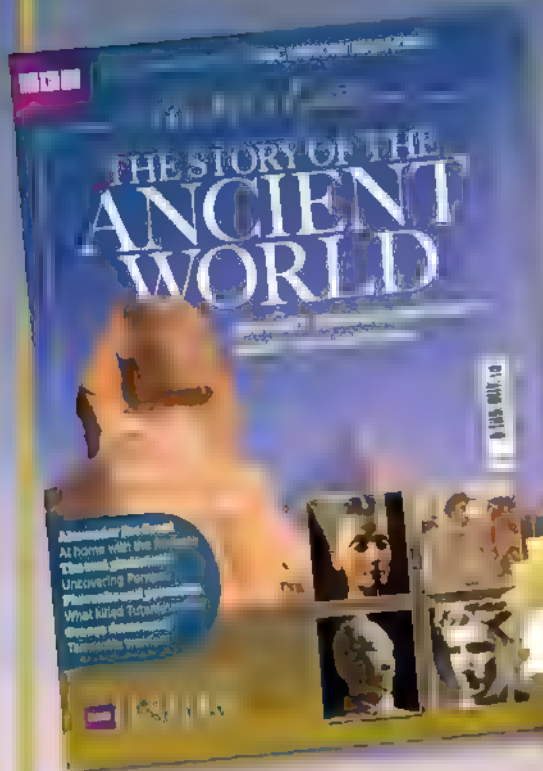


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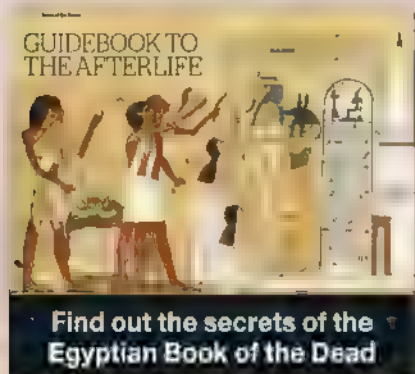


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# What did you do in the war, daddy\*?

\* mummy, granddad, grandma, uncle, aunt, great uncle, great aunt...

If you're lucky, it won't be too late to talk to your relatives to find out what they did 75 years ago. If not, **Phil Tomaselli** explains what sources you can use to find out details of Second World War lives for those who served in the British military

A group of British soldiers enjoy a well-earned tea break, c1944

THERE ARE numerous records available to help you piece together what your relatives did if they were in the armed forces during the Second World War. The types of records and where you can access them depends on which branch of the military they served in, so turn to the appropriate section for more information. If your relative was unfortunate enough to have been captured during the war, there are other records that reveal a little of what happened to prisoners of war, and we cover those on the final page of the feature.

**British Army** page 106  
**Royal Navy** page 108  
**Royal Air Force** page 110  
**Prisoners of war** page 112

Phil Tomaselli writes for BBC History Magazine's sister publication *Who Do You Think You Are? Magazine*, aimed at family historians. The following features are

extracts of pieces previously published in that magazine.

For more about the magazine, see [www.whodoyouthinkyou-aremagazine.com](http://www.whodoyouthinkyou-aremagazine.com)





# The British Army

OVER THREE MILLION men served in the British Army during the Second World War, the biggest of the armed forces. There are records of individuals, which are still closed but can be obtained by their next of kin, and records of the units they served in, which are publicly available at The National Archives (TNA). Virtually every British officer or soldier served in either a regiment (like the Coldstream Guards or Wiltshire Regiment), the fighting troops, or in a corps (like the Royal Artillery, or Corps of Signals) as support troops, though they were frequently involved in fighting themselves. In a regiment soldiers would normally serve in a particular battalion; in a corps they were usually part of a company or were attached to another unit. You'll need to find out the unit they served in – and to do this you'll need to obtain their service record.

British soldiers trudge through the desert in north Africa, c1943

## ➤ Obtaining an army service record

Army service records are held in **Glasgow**. They're indexed by service number, rank, full name and date of birth – you'll need to provide as much of this information as possible, together with your relative's regiment or corps if known, to help locate them.

Records of deceased Ex-servicemen/women will generally only be released only to, or with the consent of, the official Next of Kin. You'll need to provide a **Certificate of Kinship form** and a **Subject Access Request (SAR) form**, which are downloadable from the Gov.UK Website (see below). The charge is

£30.00 (waived for surviving spouse). Cheques must be payable to 'MOD Accounting Officer' and should be included with the completed Certificate of Kinship and SAR form. **Obtaining records may take some time.**

The relevant page of the Gov.UK website is at [http://www.veterans-uk.info/service\\_records/army.html](http://www.veterans-uk.info/service_records/army.html).

Address your written request to: **The Army Personnel Centre, MS Support Unit, P & D Branch Historical Disclosures, MP 555, Kentigern House, 65 Brown Street, Glasgow G2 8EX.**

## ➤ Army service records

Surviving records generally comprise **forms or cards summarising general correspondence**. These contain some genealogical information (date of birth, details of spouse, next of kin) but mostly deal with postings, service abroad, injuries or wounds and conduct.

A variety of forms or cards may be sent to you including **enlistment documents** (Army Form B284) which may include brief records of service, Regimental Conduct Sheets (recording disciplinary offences like drunkenness or overstaying leave), Medical History and Dental Treatment Sheets. Of greatest use in tracing service is the **Service and Casualty Form** (Army Form B103).

This gives basic personal information, then details promotions (acting temporary, local or substantive), appointments, transfers, postings, attachments etc, forfeiture of pay, wounds, accidents, admission to and

discharge from hospital, casualty clearing stations, date of disembarkation and embarkation from a theatre of war (including furlough etc). **The whole basic structure of the soldier's career is here!**

There may also be an **Army Form B 102** which contains similar information to the B 103 but usually in more condensed form. There may also be **discharge papers** which provide some details of where they served, along with a testimonial (brief written note by an officer saying how they conducted themselves).

Don't expect to find anything about what the unit your relative served in was actually doing – for this you'll need to consult their **War Diary**. The service record should provide enough information to help you trace the relevant diary(ies). Surviving Army Medal citations are in WO 373 series at TNA and are downloadable from their website.



## ➤ War Diaries

All army units kept a War Diary, recording their daily activities, invaluable for finding records of movements, training and fighting a relative took part in. Diaries are at TNA but held by 'theatres'. If a unit served in France in 1939, then in Britain after Dunkirk, later in north Africa and in France after D-Day, you'll have to search several theatres to get the whole history. Diaries may include maps, orders, intelligence, lists of men attached from other units or away on detachment and notes on operations.

Unlike War Diaries from the First World War, most of which are online, all those for the Second World War still have to be viewed as original documents at TNA. By diligently following the diaries it's possible to build a good picture of your relative's career. To help you search for a particular diary here's a list of war theatres:

### War Diaries by theatre of operations

WO 165	War Office Directorates
WO 166	Home Forces
WO 167	British Army in France/ Belgium
WO 168	Norway 1939-40
WO 169	Middle East
WO 170	Central Mediterranean (1942-46)
WO 171	France, Belgium, Holland, Germany (1943-1946)
WO 172	India, Burma, Malaya (1939-46)
WO 173	West Africa
WO 174	Madagascar
WO 175	Tunisia & Algeria (1941-43)
WO 176	W Indies, Iceland, Gibraltar, Russia & Island garrisons
WO 177	Medical Services
WO 178	Military Missions
WO 179	Dominion forces
WO 199	Home Forces
WO 215	GHQ Liaison Regiment
WO 218	Special Forces
DEFE 2	Combined Ops HQ and Ministry of Defence

## Women in the army

### ➤ The Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS)

Hundreds of thousands of women served during the Second World War. Conscriptio was introduced for women in 1941. In the army they generally served in the Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) as **clerks, drivers and mechanics, in radar stations and decoding units and operated anti-aircraft guns**. In June 1943 there were

210,308 officers and women in the ATS. Their service records are in the same **Glasgow MOD office** as their male counterparts.

Most ATS served on attachment to other units so you'll need to find the War Diaries from the units they served with, though there are some War Diaries specific to ATS units throughout the main series.

You can search on TNAs catalogue using Auxiliary Territorial Service as the key search term.

The **Women's Royal Army Corps Museum collection** has passed to the National Army Museum, Royal Hospital Road, Chelsea, London SW3 4HT (Tel. 020 7730 0717; Website: <http://www.nam.ac.uk/>)

### ➤ Nurses and the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD)

The army nursing service was provided by **Queen Alexandra's Imperial Nursing Service**. Service records are held by the MOD in Glasgow. A few hospital war diaries are available at TNA. A specific medal awarded to military nurses is the **Royal Red Cross**. There are registers for awards covering the Second World War in WO 145/2 and WO 145/3. Medal citations are in WO 373.

The VAD were part of the **Red Cross**, running hospitals and convalescent homes as well as helping staff military hospitals,

acting as support staff to nurses, administrators, ambulance drivers and cooks. Their service records are held by the Red Cross in the form of **record cards**, information on which may include dates of service, the nature of duties performed, the detachment belonged to, the institutions and places where they served and any honours awarded.

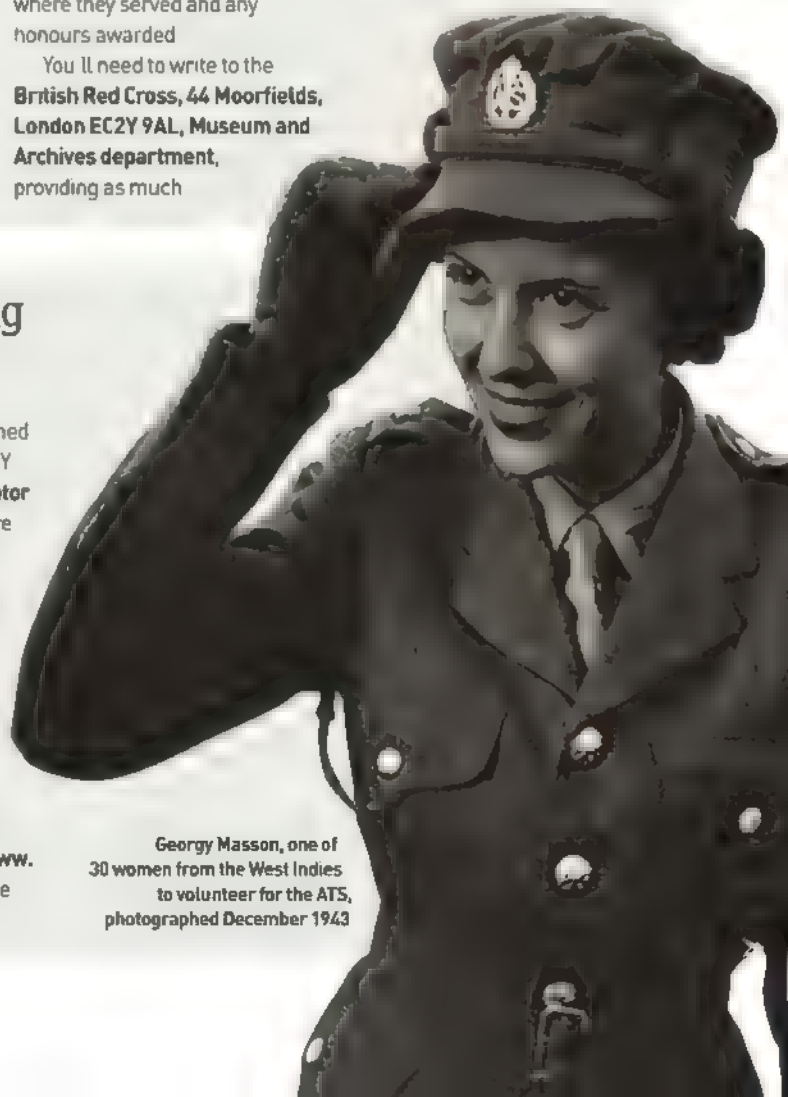
You'll need to write to the **British Red Cross, 44 Moorfields, London EC2Y 9AL, Museum and Archives department**, providing as much

information about the individual as possible. In particular it's useful to include: any known addresses, middle names, maiden or married names, date of marriage, any known service details and date of birth. Though no formal charge is made for information, a donation would be polite.

### ➤ First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY)

A small volunteer organisation formed before the First World War, the FANY formed the basis of the first **ATS Motor Driver Companies**. Other FANY were attached to the **Polish army**. Many FANY joined **Special Operations Executive** (or were commissioned into FANY as cover) serving as cipher clerks, radio operators and administrative assistants. Many of SOE's women agents were FANY.

Records of FANY members are at their HQ: **FANY (PRVC), PO Box 68218, London, SW1P 9UP**. Email: [hq@fany.org.uk](mailto:hq@fany.org.uk). Website: <http://www.fany.org.uk/>. A charge may be made for finding their records.



Georgy Masson, one of 30 women from the West Indies to volunteer for the ATS, photographed December 1943

A rear gunner in position on board a British minesweeper, March 1942

# The Royal Navy

THE ROYAL NAVY was the biggest in the world at the start of the Second World War, but even so, required thousands more officers and men as the war progressed to man the new ships required for anti-submarine work, convoy escorts and amphibious warfare. By 1945 the Royal Navy had grown to almost 900 major warships and 866,000 men and women. Some 1,525 vessels of all sizes were lost in the war, including 224 large warships. Over 50,000 British naval personnel lost their lives.

## ➤ Royal Navy service records

From the Second World War into the 1970s all naval personnel were given their service record when they were discharged. For pension purposes the RN only retained their pay details. Therefore the only information held on RN personnel from the Second World War is their service details (number, rank, name etc) and a list of dates and ships/shore bases. If your relative served in the navy do check any surviving paperwork you have which might be the service record – this is likely to contain more personal information about their career. If you don't have it you can apply (if you are next of kin or obtain their authority) to

RN Disclosures Cell, Room 48, West Battery, Whale Island, Portsmouth, Hants, PO2 8DX. You can download the necessary forms from the Royal Navy section of the Gov UK website

at <https://www.gov.uk/get-copy-military-service-records/overview>.

For relatively senior naval officers at the start of the Second World War (from about lieutenant commander upwards) there's a good chance that their service record will be open in the ADM 196 series which contains records of career officers who enlisted before 1917. ADM 196 is searchable and downloadable on TNA's website in their Records on Line section and also on Findmypast. It is worth checking this for known career naval officers before applying to the MOD. The records consist of ledger pages detailing the ships they served on and contain personal assessments of their professional capabilities written by senior officers; there may also be references to individual papers (usually in ADM 1) which refer to the individual.

## ➤ Submarines

If your relative served aboard submarines their service records (obtainable through the Portsmouth office) often don't show which individual submarines they served on, because ratings were sent to depot ships as part of a pool of trained personnel for a submarine flotilla. The archive of the Submarine Museum at Gosport holds the surviving movement record cards for ratings from the First World War to the end of the Second World War showing the individual submarines that men were assigned to. Submarine log books are held at TNA in their ADM 173 series.



The crew of the submarine Thrasher wave a Jolly Roger, January 1943

## ➤ Fleet Air Arm

Between the wars the Fleet Air Arm (FAA) was a joint responsibility of the RAF and the Royal Navy. In 1938 the navy took over the whole organisation and the FAA became a naval responsibility. By the end of the Second World War the FAA had over 50 operational carriers and 3,243 pilots serving in every ocean.

If your relative served with the FAA you will need to write to the Naval Section at Portsmouth for their records. FAA squadron records can be found in ADM 207 and AIR 27. The Fleet Air Arm Museum at Yeovilton has extensive records from the period including many thousands of photographs.



## ➤ Other naval records

**Ships' logs** are in ADM 53 series at TNA but they usually only record the ship's movements and weather conditions with the briefest description of any action the ship might have been in. The majority of **naval records relating to ships and activities** are in files in ADM 1, ADM 116 or ADM 199 series. The majority of these files for the Second World War have been indexed, at least by the title of the file, online at TNA website

More detailed indexing, including references to individuals and ships, are held in **large ledgers**

in the **ADM 12 series**. Each year is likely to have several volumes, indexed alphabetically. Each page is divided into three sections dealing with officers, ships and 'promiscuous' (meaning miscellaneous). Knowing the name of the person, ship, place or subject you're interested in you can use the index to trace mentions of them, with a further reference to the actual document in one of the other series. You may need to take the advice of TNA staff to decipher the ADM 12 reference and turn it into a reference in the other series.

## ➤ The Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) & Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR)

Two reserve organisations existed to boost naval manpower in the event of war. The RNR consisted of merchant seamen and officers who'd given a commitment to transfer to the Royal Navy in the event of war. Many were **fishermen, sent to man anti-submarine vessels or mine clearance trawlers**. Others served on board armed merchant ships which acted as escort vessels for convoys. The RNVR was made up of men, not all with sailing experience, who were **called up or volunteered** in wartime. Many who enlisted during the war enlisted in the RNVR.

A few service records for WW2 RNR and RNVR officers are to be found in TNA's ADM 240 and ADM 340 series but for the vast majority you'll need to apply to Portsmouth. Some WW2 RNR ratings service records (which were held in card form) are available online via TNA website in the Records Online section. **You may find more than one record per man**. Records run as late as 1955 (you'll need to contact TNA to apply specially for records of men born less than a century ago) and the originals are held at the Fleet Air Arm Museum at Yeovilton.

## ➤ Royal Marines

Royal Marines are the **navy's soldiers**, traditionally manning some ships' guns and leading raiding or boarding parties. Some 80,000 served during the Second World War. In late 1941 marines were asked to **volunteer for special duties of a hazardous nature** – the first RM commando unit, blooded on the beaches of Dieppe.

In 1942 the corps began converting to amphibious commando units. 40 and 41 RM Commandos participated in the **Sicily invasion** of 1943 and seven (42 to 48) other commandos were formed. On **D-Day** five commandos were in the initial landing, with other marines manning landing craft, support units and bombarding ships. 4th Marine Brigade cleared the Schelde estuary allowing access to Antwerp. Other units fought in the **Mediterranean and Far East**. Most WW2 Royal Marine

service records are retained by the MOD and you'll need to contact the RN Portsmouth office. If your relative enlisted before 1925 their record may be available in TNA's ADM 159 series, searchable and downloadable online TNA website in the Online Collections section. **Some senior WW2 RM officers may also be found online in ADM 196 if they enlisted before 1917.**

Royal Marine War Diaries are in TNA's ADM 202 series with additional material in DEFE 2. ADM 201/111 contains a list of known RM prisoners of war in Germany.

**The majority of Marine medal recommendations are in ADM 1 series** and can be searched for in the same way as for sailors, but some relating to Combined Operations are in DEFE 2 and some are in WO 373 [Army Recommendations] available online.



Royal Marines charge through a smokescreen in a training exercise, c1944

## Women in the Royal Navy ➤ WRNS and QARNNS

In 1939, as part of a programme to *Free a Man for the Fleet*, the Royal Navy recruited thousands of women to act as cooks, clerks, despatch riders and intelligence. The **Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS – soon known as wrens)** was first formed in 1917. By the end of the Second World War, its members were working as radio operators, meteorologists and bomb range markers with a few even going to sea as cypher officers, coders and boat's crews. At its peak in September 1944, there were some **74,000 WRNS** officers and other ranks serving in the navy.

Wrens worked at shore stations all over the world, many of them far from the sea. At Bletchley Park, where the **Government Code & Cypher School** broke enemy codes, the majority of the thousands of women staff were wrens, acting as radio operators, Morse code readers and teleprinter typists. Postings to Bletchley may appear as GC&CS but possibly also SLU (Special Liaison Units), FSU (Field Signals Intelligence Units) or GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters).

The **Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service (QARNNS)**

served in troop ships, hospital ships and land hospitals around the world.

Service records for the WRNS and QARNNS were, as with their male colleagues, **handed over to the individual** when they left the service but a basic record can be reconstructed and you'll need to contact the **Royal Navy Disclosures Cell in Portsmouth**. Once you know their postings from the record provided you can try and trace records of the bases they worked at.

A despatch rider from the Women's Royal Naval Service delivers another letter, 1942





A bomber crew returns from a mission over Antwerp, April 1942

# The Royal Air Force

AT THE HEIGHT of the Second World War some 110,000 officers and 1,050,000 other ranks were serving in the Royal Air Force. RAF units fought in every theatre of the war, including squadrons sent to Russia to protect the ports used by the Arctic convoys. Fighter squadrons defended Britain against the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain, bombers attacked enemy targets and Coastal Command helped the Royal Navy

against enemy U-boats in the Atlantic. Whereas army personnel joined a regiment or corps, each a part of the army, RAF personnel joined the RAF itself and could be posted to several squadrons or stations during the course of their service. Squadrons undertook operations and stations were bases for one or more squadrons, housed the men and supported and coordinated their work. The RAF also had many support units

including technical schools, hospitals, depots and repair bases to which someone could be posted. It even had its own soldiers for defence of RAF bases – the RAF Regiment, formed in 1942.

## ➤ Obtaining an RAF service record

To find out about their service you'll need to obtain their service record. Though these aren't available to the general public they will be released to the next of kin. You can obtain the necessary Subject Access Request form and Certificate of Kinship Form via the government website at <https://www.gov.uk/get-copy-military-service-records/overview>. The completed forms should be sent to RAF 3rd Party Disclosure Team, Room 14, Trenchard Hall, RAF Cranwell, Sleaford, Lincs, NG34 8HB. Cheques should be payable to HMG sub account 3627

You should provide as many details of your relative as possible, especially their service number (if you have it), full name, date of birth

and rank (if possible)

The **'other ranks' service record summary, Form 543**, shows next of kin, details of marriage (if any), civilian occupation, date of birth, service number (usually 7 digits), postings, promotions and qualifications and conduct and trade assessments. Also any medals, honours and awards, prior service in HM forces and for time forfeited due to misconduct. There is a brief physical description. For an **officer** you are likely to receive more information, including copies of confidential reports, submitted by a senior officer, giving information about the man under his command

## ➤ RAF service records

Once you know their squadron(s), station(s) or unit(s), and the dates they served there, you can begin to look for the records which will tell you more about what they did. Whereas the army has War Diaries the RAF has Operation Record Books (ORBs), which detail their day to day activities. **ORBs are held at TNA in their AIR class.** AIR 27 holds squadron records (which can be downloaded from TNA website), AIR 28 station records and AIR 29 records of the many small units (such as Air-Sea Rescue units, Training Schools and maintenance units). You can search for the relevant ORB(s) using TNA website's search facility

The information in an ORB depends to some extent upon the diligence of the officer who completed it, but should give basic details. For a squadron this should include details of flights made – if a bomber squadron it should give

details of every aircraft taking part in a raid, along with a list of the crew and a brief description of the flight and conditions over the bombing target. Base ORBs will give broader details of raids that squadrons based there took part in, on numbers of aircraft based there, of official visits, enemy attacks, accidents and the movement of officers. Other units' records depend on the nature of their work – RAF training schools will often give details of the courses being given

Even during quiet periods **Squadron and Base Log Books** detail training carried out, numbers of aircraft worked on, important events (bases not involved in D-Day were sea-landed prior to the operation to prevent leaks of information for example) and social events. They are very useful for building up a picture of your relative's work



## ➤ Log books

If you're lucky enough to have a relative's log book, it can save you a lot of work – there's a great deal of information contained in it.

**Everyone who flew regularly kept a log.** Partly this was because you were entitled to flight pay depending upon a minimum number of hours flown each month. The log book had to be signed off monthly by the senior officer. It wasn't only pilots who kept a log book – observers, navigators and air gunners did too.

From the very earliest days of aviation the information contained in the log book has remained pretty much unchanged. The type of aircraft is recorded, along with its individual number, the name of the pilot (if it's not his log book), the time the aircraft took off, the purpose of the flight, remarks on the flight and the flight's length. The log book will also note any transfer to a new squadron or station. There'll be a brief note of any fighting in which they've taken part.

For administrative purposes the RAF was divided, at its highest level, into commands, each centred on a particular role. **Bomber Command** controlled the bomber force, **Fighter Command** flying fighters, **Coastal Command** flying boats and aircraft that operated in co-operation with the navy; **Balloon Command** the barrage balloons. **Training and Maintenance Commands** Ferry Command and some short-lived commands provided back-up to the fighting commands. Records are often held together under the command and it is sometimes worth looking for records further up the chain of command for more information. A squadron would be part of a wing, a wing part of a group and the group would report to the command itself. Broader pictures of, for example, a bomber raid, are more likely to be found at group or command level than at squadron level.

Was your friend or relative an RAF airman during the war?



## ➤ Combat reports

The RAF, as a technical service, has always tried to collect information on aircraft performance and to analyse it to help in development. It also collected information on combats so enemy tactics could be analysed and new counter tactics devised. All pilots engaged in a combat (not just fighter pilots) were interviewed by the Squadron Intelligence Officer soon after landing and asked to describe the fight. This material is collected in TNA's **AIR 50 series**. Initial reports were sparse but later ones were written on pre-printed forms so that information collected was standardised.

A typical report from warrant Officer Dean with 135 Squadron records: "I opened fire on port a/c from 300 yards dead astern holding the burst as the range closed. Enemy a/c banked slowly to port and I continued to fire using deflection to a range of 50 yards. Total length of burst estimated at 8 seconds. E/A commenced to pour out thick black smoke from the motor which enveloped the fuselage and half the main-planes as it rolled over and went down." The report gives many other details of the action, including the loss of a Hurricane. If your relative flew in combat missions their reports should be in AIR 50, and in fact many **combat reports are now available online** at TNA's website in their documents online section. They can be searched under individual name or by squadron – but please note that not all combat reports have survived the years.

## ➤ RAF websites

► The UK government website at <https://www.gov.uk/get-copy-military-service-records/overview> gives details for tracing the records RAF service personnel and provides the forms you'll need to get started.

► The National Archives website at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk) is vital for finding records of RAF units, has useful information sheets that will help you and combat reports can be downloaded.

► RAF Museum at Hendon [www.rafmuseum.org.uk](http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk) provides useful links to various RAF Association websites. Their archives contain many useful records such as a collection of aircrew logbooks, and the Air Transport Auxiliary personal records.

► The RAF official website <http://www.raf.mod.uk/> provides a comprehensive history of the Service through its links with the RAF Historical Branch.

► [www.bomber-command.info](http://www.bomber-command.info) is a private site giving much interesting and useful information.

► There's a website devoted to the WAAF at [www.waafassociation.org.uk](http://www.waafassociation.org.uk).

► [www.pmrains.org/index.htm](http://www.pmrains.org/index.htm) gives a brief history of the RAF Nursing Service.

► The website of the Royal Air Forces Associations at <http://www.raf.mod.uk/links/rafassociations.cfm> provides many fascinating links which might prove useful.

## Women in the RAF

### ➤ WAAF, Nursing Service and ATA

The **Women's Auxiliary Air Force** was formed in June 1939. WAAF's were always intended to work in the front line as radar operators and in Sector Control. They later worked in meteorology, transport, telephony and telegraphy, coding, intelligence, security and in operation rooms. By September 1945 there were **5,638 WAAF officers and 135,891 other ranks**. In 1949 the WAAF became the Women's Royal Air Force, amalgamating with the RAF in 1994.

The **Princess Mary's Royal Air Force Nursing Service** became a permanent part of the RAF in 1921. During the Second World War RAF nurses served worldwide. By 1943 there were 31 RAF hospitals and 71 station sick quarters.

Second World War **RAF Medical Services records** are in TNA's AIR 49 Series. Compiled on a Command or District level they often contain reports from individual medical units. ORB's for hospitals and other medical units are in AIR 29.

WAAF and Nurses Service Records are held by the MOD so you'll need to write to **RAF Cranwell**.

The **Air Transport Auxiliary** was a civilian organisation run by BOAC, delivering aircraft



from factories to RAF stations. Though the vast majority of its pilots were men it did employ some women pilots, as well as administrative staff. Service Records (including administrative, catering and other staff) are at the **RAF Museum Hendon**, with a 75-year embargo if you're not next of kin.

You'll have to prove that you're next of kin, or provide their authority (or the authority of the person themselves) to receive a copy.

Jubilant prisoners of war are freed from a Japanese camp, August 1945



# Prisoners of war

MANY PRISONERS OF WAR suffered appalling conditions during the conflict. Unearthing details is fascinating and worthwhile, but can be an emotionally gruelling experience. In Germany questionnaires were filled out by many prisoners, and there are camp histories held in the UK by the army, navy and air force. Meanwhile the Red Cross holds some of the grimmer details, though reports from Japan are still patchy.

## ➤ Prisoners of war records

Very few POW records are online. TNA series WO 392/1 – WO 392/26 contain detailed lists of prisoners held by Germany and Japan in the closing months of the war and the Prisoner List for Germany is available on Findmypast and Ancestry.

**MI9 helped prisoners escape** and trained them in avoiding capture. It interrogated released prisoners and each completed a questionnaire containing details of place and date of capture, camps held in, injuries and treatment by their captors. They also detail any training in escape and evasion procedures and escape attempts. Reports are held alphabetically by surname in WO 344. Though not every prisoner was questioned, this is probably the most comprehensive source openly available on prisoners in Germany.

When **Italy switched sides** in September 1943 about 30,000 prisoners escaped. There are four main sources for their **escape reports**. WO 208/3343–3345 and WO 208/5393–5404 contain

reports made by escapers southwards; WO 208/4238–4276 and WO 208/4368–4371 contain reports by those reaching Switzerland.

A number of **camp histories** were compiled by all three services. Army histories are in WO 208, RAF histories in AIR 40 and Navy histories are in ADM 1. WO 208/3277 is the history of **Stalag VIII C at Kunau in Silesia**. By December 1944 the camp held 6,969 prisoners, mostly British but including men from the Dominions. It describes living conditions, mail received, leisure activities and the work camps under Stalag VIII C's control. Men worked in concrete factories, railway works, gasworks, in the Post Office, on tramways and on aerodromes. The history notes that Stalag VIII C compared very favourably with other Stalags and the morale of POWs was high throughout.

There are **extensive reports on ill-treatment or killing of prisoners**. Records of the investigations into the killing of

50 escaped prisoners at Stalag Luft III (famous from the film *The Great Escape*) are in WO 208/5633 and WO 208/5634, with other papers elsewhere in the WO 208, WO 32, WO 309, WO 311, AIR 2 and AIR 40 series.

## ➤ Prisoners of war record cards

TNA holds record cards for British prisoners of war in the **Far East** in their WO 345 Series, consisting of **56,000 pre-printed cards** compiled by an unknown central Japanese authority.

The cards record the following details: camp (in Japanese); name; nationality; rank; place of capture; place of origin; unit and service number; date captured; occupation; medical details (on the reverse and in Japanese).

Diagonal red lines across a card indicate the prisoner died in captivity.

Dates are written in the American style, so 31st December 1918 is written 1918.12.31 and the year of date of

## ➤ Red Cross reports

Regular Red Cross visits ensured the terms of the Geneva Convention were being kept and **their reports are at TNA**. You can find them under **WO 224** on the TNA website. Reports include details of the German officials in each camp, of medical staff, accommodation, health and medical conditions, hygiene, laundry, food and discipline. There are reports on conditions in the many work detachments. Reports on Japanese camps tend to contain far less detail.

The International Red Cross was responsible for recording and advising on prisoners and their records are now centralised in Switzerland. They have previously released information to next of kin but, due to pressure of work caused by the current humanitarian crises, to which the IRC is obliged to devote all its resources, **requests for information on WW2 POWs are suspended**. Their website at <https://www.icrc.org> will advise if and when service resumes.

capture is given as 16, 17, 18 or 19 (1941, 42, 43 and 45 respectively).

Prisoner of War record cards for men captured by the Germans, which were previously obtainable from The Veterans Agency, have been released to TNA in the r WO 416 series. The series is currently closed while access to them is reviewed. **The card is similar in design to the Japanese cards**, giving very much the same kind of information, including date and place of capture, the camps held in name and address of next of kin. Though the basic card is in German they were completed in English.



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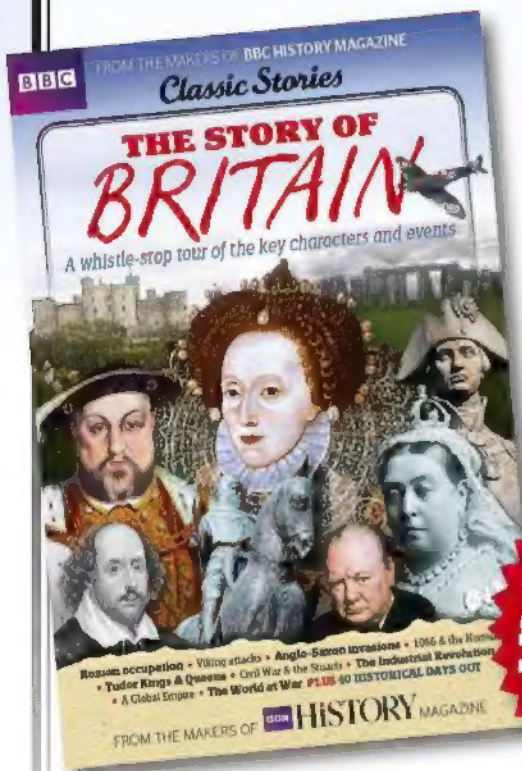
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# I was there

Bill Moylon:

## Japanese soldiers made me dig my own grave

**I**T WAS A NUCLEAR BOMB that saved Bill Moylon's life. In the summer of 1945 the Japanese government ordered that all prisoners in South East Asia were to be executed if the home islands were invaded. Along with his fellow captives in a Thai POW camp Bill was ordered to dig a trench that was to be their mass burial place. But on 6 August the United States dropped the first bomb on Hiroshima. Faced with a weapon of such ferocity, Tokyo surrendered and Bill awoke on 18 August to find all the guards had vanished. His three-and-a-half-year ordeal was over.

When war broke out Bill was 23 years old. Born in Newport, he was then an employee of London Transport. He was called up in 1940 and the following year set sail for the Far East as part of the Royal Army Ordinance Corps. In Bombay Bill boarded a troop ship *The Empress of Asia* headed for the island of Singapore that was imperilled by a rapid Japanese advance through Malaya. On 5 February 1942 disaster struck. "We were 20 miles from Singapore when a flight of

nine bombers came over," recalls Bill. "We had five bombs dropped on the ship and she burned like paper. We had to abandon her."

After four hours clinging onto a raft, Bill was picked up by an Indian gunboat and taken to Singapore. It was too late for the new arrivals to prevent the Japanese from capturing the island. After a few days of intense action, during which Bill received a shrapnel wound, the British gave in. Bill was one of over 60,000 British empire troops taken into captivity.

He spent a few months in Changi prison camp before in May 1942, he was selected for a special assignment. "We didn't know where we were heading. They said we were going to a land of plenty but what they didn't tell us was that we weren't going to get any of it." The prisoners travelled for four days in cattle trucks, 36 men to a carriage. "It was the most appalling conditions. There wasn't room for everyone to sit down it was that cramped and there were no toilet facilities of any sort. Sometimes we only got one meal a day."

Their destination was Bampton in Thailand. Here Bill was put to work helping to build the notorious Siam-Burma railroad. Right from the off prisoners were ill treated. On one occasion the POWs went on strike in protest, but to little avail. "The Japanese brought in troops from outside who got us out of the huts and made us stand to attention in the parade ground with machine guns all around us. They kept us there all day in the blazing sun and the following day we all went to work."

Bill was next ordered to travel up the Kwai, building prison camps at 20-mile intervals for those who were to follow. Many of his group did not survive. "We were in a malarial infested jungle with all sorts of diseases.

As well as malaria there

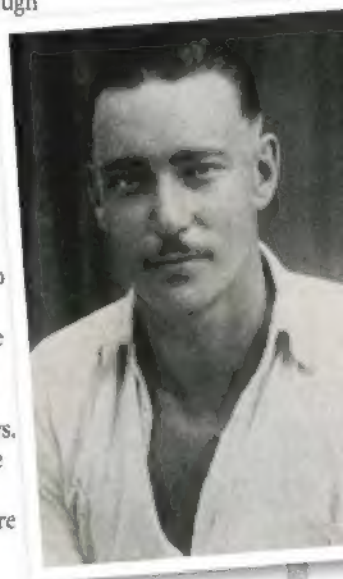
was dysentery, cholera, typhus and beriberi. There were no medical supplies or mosquito nets. And everyone suffered from malnutrition because we were on a starvation diet of rice and very little with it. Plus we were working 14 to 18-hour days."

When this job was done Bill found himself constructing the bridge over the river Kwai, first in its wooden form and later the finished incarnation. He was then taken to a camp near the Cambodian border. Here he worked in a quarry, breaking rocks that were needed for an airfield. Each man had to get through a cubic-metre of rock per day with no exemption for those who were sick.

From there Bill was transferred to a couple more camps but time was running out for the Japanese. The war had turned against them and the Allied victory came just in time to save Bill from the fate that had befallen many of his friends. "The prisoners in our camps were like the photographs of Belsen. They were all walking skeletons," he says. After the Japanese abandoned the POWs, food, medicine and clothing were parachuted in before the men were evacuated and returned home.

Now a 93-year-old Chelsea Pensioner, Bill knows he was fortunate to survive the war. "You lived with death every day," he explains. "For some reason you managed to make the right decisions at the right time when things were really grim. If you didn't then you would be a dead man." Despite his experiences, Bill doesn't bear a grudge against the Japanese. "When I found out how the Japanese were indoctrinated I thought it would be wrong to hold anything against them. They thought what they were doing was normal, that it was normal to be brutal." **II**

Bill Moylon was speaking to Rob Attar



Bill Moylon in Thailand in 1945, after three and a half years as a Japanese POW



Moylon, who was captured by the Japanese in Singapore, pictured in 2009



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